

Closer to where you are (is where I must be)

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by [sistercacao](#)

Summary

"Ilya, what are we gonna do?" Shane says.

Ilya finishes whatever he has been doing on his phone, and tosses it gently to the bed beside him. He crosses the room to Shane, stands in front of him, squeezes into his shoulders with his big hands, rubbing them like he means to warm them up.

"Looks like we will have a little vacation," he says, with a big obnoxious grin.

Boston and Montreal are sent to Paris to play against each other in an exhibition series in January 2017. Ilya and Shane decide to stay in Paris for one more night. Just one more night, so they can talk. Maybe finally understand each other.

They aren't expecting a volcano to erupt in Iceland and close all the airspace in Europe, leaving them stranded there. Together.

Notes

Okay well, hello again, I'm back on my bullshit. I started writing this even before I was finished uploading my last Hollanov fic, and now I'm at 35k-ish words, so like, I'm *in it* again.

I did more research on this than I really needed to, because we're all making stuff up over here, but yes, it turns out the NHL sends teams to play in Europe pretty often, actually! Albeit at the beginning of the season, in November. I didn't want to write *another* fic that takes place in November 2016, though, so I pushed the timeline to where the Global Series takes place in the bye week in late January (AKA instead of the All-Star Game). So imagine a world in which Ilya and Shane have their post tuna melt, post Rose Landry Tampa hotel room conversation in Paris, instead, for important Fic Purposes.

I don't know if anyone else remembers the volcano in Iceland that shut down all the air travel into and out of Europe in 2010, but I sure do! And now I'm pretending that happened in 2017 instead so Ilya and Shane have to stay in Paris together. Do I think they would have

confessed their love to each other much earlier in 2017 than at the cottage if they had been able to? Yes, yes I do.

I play fast and loose with the names here but GENERALLY: TV Show canon is my canon, so the TV Show names are my canon names, except when I can't find the name of, say, Ilya and Shane's coaches, and then I use the book names. I don't particularly try to keep accurate to book canon, sorry.

Fic title is a translation of a line from the poem Tomorrow, At Dawn by Victor Hugo.

[04/15] Added a tentative chapter total to the fic, as I have it pretty mapped out! Possibly subject to change.

[05/11] Updated chapter count!

Chapter 1: Doubt is not a pleasant condition (but certainty is absurd)

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya touch down in Europe with a lot to talk about.

Chapter Notes

I thought about changing the names of Zurich and Berlin's teams here, but then decided they were way too cool and I should just leave them as is. Lions? Polar Bears? Hell yeah.

You can assume most or all of the names of places in Paris are made up though. I did check if there is a hockey rink in Paris and the answer is kind of. France really isn't a hockey country (sort of the point of this fic!)

Chapter title is a quote by Voltaire.

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

Shane arrives in Europe first, on a Sunday, when it's cold and raining and the sky is overcast, which Shane thinks matches the way he feels pretty nicely. He thinks he might have felt more nervous, even slightly panicked, if the weather had actually been nice when they'd touched down.

It's not because of why they are there, exactly, but it is. The hockey part of it is fine, fun even. A bright idea MLH leadership cooked up as a way to drum up international interest in parts of the world that don't buy enough hockey merch, maybe. Send two teams, during the late January bye week, to Europe, to play a couple of exhibition games against some city teams there, then play a couple of friendly games against each other. Call it the Global Series, even though it's just Europe, Canada, and the United States, and that it isn't for anything other than publicity. And it makes sense, perfect sense actually, to send two teams with a famous and historic rivalry. Like, if you didn't know much about hockey, or *anything* about hockey, you could hear *rivalry* and think it might be fun to check out. Maybe the players will fight. Maybe you'll feel the bite of the animosity down on the ice from up in the risers. Sounds like fun. Buy a ticket.

That's not the part that has Shane buzzing in his seat, too keyed up to sleep on the flight, and tapping his fingers on the handle of his luggage at baggage claim, and turning his music up loud on his headphones on the bus ride to the hotel on their first stop— Zurich, to play the

city's Lions— so that he won't have to talk to anyone. That part is because of course the other team the MLH has chosen to send to the Global Series is Boston, and Ilya Rozanov is in Boston, and the thought of seeing Ilya Rozanov again, for the first time since November— and Shane has learned so much about himself since, it's almost like he's a different person on the other side— the thought of *that*, is what is making him feel this way.

Shane isn't going to see Rozanov until Tuesday, a different city and two exhibition matches from now. They aren't even in the same country yet. But it's the knowing that it's coming, that they will be in a hotel together and staring at each other from across the ice and breathing the same air, that has him like this.

Shane knows he has to talk to him, has to make an opening for it, despite the schedule being so tight he isn't sure where he'll have time to shake off the jet lag. He knows there is so much unsaid between them, apologies and revelations and declarations and pleas. He knows he has to be the one to do it. He's known that since he saw Rozanov at the club in Montreal, since he left his house in a panic in Boston. It's just, he doesn't know what's going to happen after that. If Rozanov will even talk to him in the first place. Shane thinks he will, but maybe he'll just tell him to fuck off, and find a club in Paris to pick up a girl and bring her back, and maybe text Shane a picture of him fucking her— no, that won't happen. It won't. And anyway, he has to talk to Rozanov, because. Because Shane doesn't think he can survive in this in-between space otherwise, this place where they don't speak and he feels the lack of it like his bones are hollowed out and his gut churns uselessly on the emptiness.

That is why he's freaking out. And why he knows that Montreal's flight to Zurich touched down first. He's memorized both of their schedules for the week. It felt necessary. Boston's flight is not set to arrive for another two hours, and they're heading to Berlin. Shane wonders, on the bus ride, whether he'll feel it when Ilya Rozanov has landed on the same continent as him again, whether he'll just know. Part of him kind of hopes he does.

The hotel in Zurich is nondescript, no-nonsense. Zurich is a no-nonsense city. They don't have much time to sightsee. Theriault has them doing press an hour after check-in, then a team dinner with the guys from the Lions, and Shane is pretty sure he's going to be staggering back to his room and passing out after that. Unpacking, he can already feel the otherworldly exhaustion creeping in, from not sleeping on the plane and the general wrongness his body feels from moving too quickly from one part of the world to the other. He's afraid to sit down on the bed, lest he is tempted to fall into it and miss press and get royally chewed out.

He takes questions in English and German, which is a little strange, waiting blankly for the translation in his ear, hotly aware of the intervening silence, of his face in the cameras. How does it feel to play hockey in Europe? It's an honor. He's excited to introduce Montreal to new fans. He's grateful for the opportunity to play here. Is he familiar with Zurich's team? Yes, he watched game tape to prepare. He's looking forward to the face-off with Légère, their captain. No, he's never been to Switzerland before.

He isn't asked about Boston, whether he's looking forward to that, too. Yes, of course, he would say, if he was. It's always great to play Boston, they are always a challenge. Rozanov, of course, is going to be tough to beat, but Shane is looking forward to it.

He checks his phone after the conference and sees that the Raiders' flight, according to their schedule, touched down an hour ago. He didn't feel it. Ilya Rozanov is in Berlin. Shane is in Zurich. Barely an hour and a half apart. A little closer than Montreal and Boston, by air.

And they will both be in Paris in two days.

They win the first game against Zurich, 4-2. It's fun, in the way that the All-Star Game is fun. Low stakes. Not a lot of worry about lines, though Theriault has him on the ice a lot, probably because it's what the fans want to see. He took a small handful of melatonin the night before, which is maybe why he feels awake enough for the game, but shaky and lead-limbed after. He passes out at barely nine-thirty.

He feels slightly better for the second game, in the afternoon on Tuesday, but they lose that one, 2-4. It's a convenient back and forth, he thinks. It'll look good on the Wikipedia page for this event. Boston won both of their games against Berlin, 4-0, 5-3. That almost seems like bad sportsmanship.

The most of Zurich Shane gets to see is a coffee shop just outside their hotel on Tuesday morning, and the brief glimpse of it he gets from the plane to Paris. Some of his teammates complain on the flight that it would have been nice to spend a day in Switzerland, to sightsee a little bit, but Shane sort of wishes they had skipped it entirely, wishes that he could have slept for two days and fast-forwarded straight to Tuesday, to Paris, to Ilya Rozanov.

Shane wonders, on the bus to the hotel, if he'll see Rozanov tonight, or if he'll have to wait until tomorrow night's game. Both options feel equally daunting, equally thrilling. It would be better to see him before the game, probably, Shane thinks. He should text him. Tell him he needs to talk—no, ask him if they can talk. If Rozanov hasn't lost his number by now. No, he wouldn't do that. Right?

"Rain here too, huh?" Hayden says, peering out the dark window, half of his face lit red by the tail lights of cars in the traffic around them. "Hey Shane, you ever been to Paris before?"

"Huh?" Shane forgot to put his headphones in, thought everyone was tired enough that he didn't need to. Whoops. "No. First time."

"Same," Hayden says, which Shane is not surprised to hear. Hayden married his high school sweetheart and has been living and breathing hockey since he was six years old, just like Shane. No, he hasn't been to Paris. "Hope we get to see a little more of the city, eh? Jackie wants me to get some cute clothes for the kids. I'm like, *babe*, we're going to be in the hotel or at the rink the whole time. I just hope I get to see the sun sometime."

"Yeah, totally," Shane says, though he hasn't put any thought into where he would go in the city if they did have time unaccounted-for in the schedule, what gifts he would get his parents. They're not huge gift-givers to begin with. He supposes the brand meetings he agreed to are enough of a gift to his mom, at least. He's staying an extra day to meet with Dior, because they value face time, and Mom thinks it'll look good for him to have at least one high fashion brand in his cadre, and Shane doesn't know or care enough to argue any of it. But there isn't enough time around the extra day— not even a whole day, really, more just

an afternoon— to sightsee, so Shane hasn't planned anything. First time in Paris, and he's doing exactly what he does at home, but with a bonus helping of jet lag.

The hotel is on the same bank as the arena where they will be playing. Shane can see the oblong dome of the Stade Bercy as they pull into the hotel parking lot. Hayden's right, they're probably not going to be seeing much more than this combination for the few days they are here. Theriault would probably say: it's a work trip, boys, and they are here to work.

They have their rooms to themselves, at least. That's nice. It will be a total waste if Rozanov tells him to fuck off. If Shane doesn't get to put it to good use. He's probably getting ahead of himself.

The hotel is grey. Grey floors, grey carpet, grey window treatments. Like it's meant to be ignored, fade into the background. There are small idiosyncrasies that remind him he's not in North America— the bed is smaller, the shape and height of the toilet gives him a kind of uncanny valley feeling he has never associated with bathrooms before. The hotel shower is the kind where the head is on a handle and attached to a long, snaking tube. Everything is just slightly, subtly different, like it's designed to quietly drive Shane insane.

He's strangely homesick for the hotels he's more familiar with, the places he goes the most. He misses the Radisson in Boston where Shane climbed onto Rozanov's lap and rode him until he came so hard it hit Rozanov in the chin and he made Shane lick it off. He misses the hotel from the last All Star Game, where the bedspread was inexplicably paisley print and Rozanov whispered Russian into his ear as he pulled Shane's head back with a hand in his hair. He misses the audacious hotels in Vegas, where the bathrooms are palatial and fitted with dual-head showers and jacuzzis like it's Disneyland for horny freaks like him.

But it's okay. All he needs this hotel to provide is the opportunity to talk to Rozanov. All he needs Paris to provide, really. Just the space to say what he really, really needs to say.

I'm gay, Rozanov. And. Also. Also I think I'm in love with you and I think you might also like me more than just a fuck buddy and I don't think I can leave Paris without knowing if that's true.

Or some version of that, at least.

Shane unpacks his suitcase and puts his clothes away into the drawers of the hotel dresser even though he will only be here three nights. He does this even when he's only staying one night. He hates pulling stuff out of his suitcase when he needs to change. The clothes he's already worn, from Zurich, are folded but separated from his clean ones, and he puts those away as well, in a separate drawer. He does a miniature version of his normal hotel bed inspection, because he's dog tired after the hour and a half of traffic on the *périphérique* from Charles de Gaulle and he almost doesn't care about bed bugs as a result.

He can hear voices in the hallway, a general din of conversation. It's late, but probably not too late at all for the plans the average hockey player makes when there's no game until the following night. Go out, get drunk, find a girl, maybe. Shane has been the odd man out in this way his entire career, not just because he's not interested in the *finding a girl* part. It's why he gets along better with the older guys, the married guys like Hayden, who don't go out much,

either, but he can't blame the younger guys who do. It's Paris. It's Europe. These games have no bearing on stats or playoff contention, so it doesn't matter much if they play like shit tomorrow.

Shane wonders who is going out tonight on his team, trying to suss out the players from the voices as they approach his door. Riley, probably. If he's going, Lowry's going, too. JJ wouldn't miss a chance to flirt in French, he thinks. He'll probably play up the Quebecois accent with the girls. *Oh, you say copine here, we say blonde in Quebec.* That sort of thing.

The voices approach, reach the threshold of Shane's hotel door, and become clear enough for him to make out the conversation being loudly and carelessly conducted in the hallway.

"I do not care if you marry this girl next week, Marley, you are not missing out on Paris clubs because of fucking *girlfriend*."

Oh fuck. Oh my god, Shane thinks. It's not Lowry, or JJ. It's fucking *Ilya Rozanov*. It's his deep, rolling voice, his carefully enunciated words, his clipped vowels, his r's growled in his throat. His breathing, his footsteps.

Rozanov. Ilya.

Shane's heart is in his throat and he isn't even sure what he's doing until he's at his door and he's already got his hand on the handle and pulled it halfway open, and he's stepping out and staring stupidly down the hallway at the receding backs of Cliff Marleau and Ilya Rozanov, grey carpet and grey paint on the walls all just making Rozanov glow like a fucking candle in the middle of it, makes the blond in his thick curls brighter, the definition of his huge body under his obnoxious shirt more severe. Or maybe that's just Shane's hunger for him, his desperation to see him, or just a Pavlovian response to being in any hotel where Ilya Rozanov is close enough to touch. Shane's mouth is watering like it's getting ready for him.

And he doesn't know what his intention was in opening the door and staring at Rozanov like a lovesick idiot, doesn't know if there was any intention to it at all other than raw, pathetic wanting. But it probably wasn't to have Rozanov hear the door open and turn around and see Shane watching him, and stop in his tracks and stare.

Normally, opposing teams do not end up on the same hotel floors, for obvious reasons. But apparently, none of the rules matter here. It is just another thing that makes this hotel, this series, different than what Shane is used to. Another thing that has him feeling flat-footed, throat tight, eyes hot. Or maybe that is just because of the way Rozanov is looking at him. His eyes are a deeper blue than normal in the grey hallway. Or maybe Shane has just forgotten them. He knows that's not it, but it is a nice fantasy, imagining that he might not have every part of Ilya Rozanov's body memorized so accurately.

"Huh?" Marleau says, noticing Rozanov has stopped a step or two behind him. He looks back to where Rozanov is looking, sees Shane. "Oh, Hollander. Shit, they've got us on the same floor?" He laughs at the coincidence of it. No, a coincidence only to Shane and Rozanov, probably. To Cliff Marleau, it's probably nothing at all.

"Hey," Shane says, to Rozanov.

Rozanov nods. His eyes cast up and down the length of Shane's body. Shane is keenly aware he looks stupid, that he's wearing the worn-out shit he wears to sleep in hotels. He has a set of clothes he packed specifically for the conversation with Rozanov. He told his stylist to pick something appropriate for a *date*. Hah. Feels like a joke at his expense, now.

"Hello, Hollander," Rozanov says, before he turns back in the hallway, continues on his way with Cliff Marleau.

Shane feels inexplicably humiliated as he closes the door again. He stands with his back against it, hearing his name rolled along the smooth baritone of Rozanov's voice. He feels the heat in his crotch immediately, pathetically, and presses his hand against himself, not even sure if he means to dampen down the arousal or goad it further. Fuck.

Rozanov looked carefully neutral, saying his name, eyeing him up and down. It could be because Cliff Marleau was standing right there, could see and hear anything they said or did. It could be because Rozanov doesn't give a shit about him.

Shane retreats to his bed, kicks forlornly into the covers. He gropes for his phone on the nightstand, but only scrolls down to *Lily* in his conversation list and stares at the last message he sent: *Here*, at Rozanov's house in Boston in November. His thumb hovers over the keyboard, but he doesn't even know what it is he wants to say. Just some version of *Please talk to me*.

But Rozanov is going out with his team, in Paris. He probably doesn't want to hear from Shane tonight. He probably doesn't care to hear from him at all.

Hello, Hollander.

Shane groans and tosses his phone to the far side of the bed. He rolls on his stomach, pressing his face into his pillow, and reaches into his shorts, fondling himself, thinking about the high arches of Rozanov's cupid's bow and the curl his voice adds to Shane's name, and comes too fast. It feels, somehow, like a defeat.

He has to talk to Rozanov before they leave. He has to find a way.

But he doesn't see Rozanov again until face-off the next night, where it's impossible to create an opening, where the lights are just as bright as home and the crowd seems just as hungry for the competition. The announcer's French lacks the edges of those in Montreal, but otherwise this is as familiar as any game Shane has ever played. Nobody goes too hard, nobody pushes themselves for saves and chances out of fear of injury, even though it's a little early to get too worried for playoff contention. It's fun enough. Rozanov avoids him on their shifts together, doesn't take opportunities to check Shane into the boards like he might at home. There's no bite. Shane wonders if Rozanov got too drunk last night, if he smoked too much, if he didn't sleep enough. If he was kept up by someone else.

The Metros win, 3-1, and Shane is put front and center for press, and his accent sounds harsh in his ears, surrounded by Parisian reporters and unfamiliar faces. Then, there's a dinner, just his team, out in Pigalle. The art in the restaurant is all different variations of *The Moulin*

Rouge, photographs and caricatures and watercolors. He wonders if Boston has been whisked off somewhere, too, and where.

The rain makes the night feel more frigid than the temperature on his phone would imply, and Shane thinks about Rozanov standing outside, collar turned up, trying to light his cigarette. He saw so many people smoking that morning when he went out for a coffee, casually freezing at outside cafe tables, fingers poised around cigarettes, newspapers and cell phones and tiny coffee cups in their free hands.

It made him wonder how much of Rozanov's smoking habit is influenced just by being European, though Shane also thinks maybe it's wrong to generalize. It made him think of Rozanov, regardless. More than usual. Probably.

He heads back to the hotel as most of his teammates break off into groups and start strategizing their after-dinner plans in the city. It's too late to sightsee, and too late for any gift shopping, and those are the only reasons for Shane to go out in Paris. Hayden rides back in the Uber with him, texting with Jackie.

"I'm gonna call when we get back, to say hi to the kids and Jacks," Hayden says, "if you want to jump in."

Shane wants to say no, but the only reason to say no is because he wants to leave himself open in case he miraculously runs into Rozanov at the hotel again. So he says yes, and spends fifteen minutes in the hotel lobby with Hayden, waving at the tops of his kids' heads as they chaotically pass the phone around and Jackie asks them how they're liking Paris so far.

After, he returns to his room, only hoping a little that he will see Rozanov in the hallway again, not too disappointed when he doesn't. He's pretty sure it's Marleau on his floor, anyway, not Rozanov, and he's even more sure that Rozanov is going out tonight like almost everyone else.

It's just, Shane is already thinking about how Boston leaves tomorrow, early evening, and there's one more game to play, and there just doesn't seem to be enough time to talk.

He decides, lying in the dark, that if he doesn't have a good opportunity to talk by tomorrow afternoon, he'll make one. He'll just ask Rozanov to come to his room. He'll just have to take the risk that he's left on read. He can't control that. He has never been able to control what Rozanov does. But he can at least ask.

Ilya feels sick to his stomach.

It's not a new feeling, not even for the venue, this long, swooping VIP booth and his teammates on either side of him and an array of drinks and bottles spread out in front of them. He had felt sick to his stomach in Montreal, at another equally dark and thumping club,

seeing Shane Hollander with Rose Landry on the dance floor. His gut had churned even as he had pulled that girl he wheeled away from the lights and tried to get interested in fingering her off to the side of the club, wanted to do it while he knew Hollander was still in the same room, but it had proven impossible. Ilya had felt so unsettled on the plane to Berlin that he'd sat with the air sickness bag clutched in his hand for the last four hours of the flight. At least looking sick to death on a plane was easy enough to explain away.

Hollander's teammates are here, too, at the same club, but Hollander is not; Ilya has made absolutely certain of that. He can't help it, knowing they are in the same city for two nights. He has to scan every room he enters with the urgency of a SWAT team conducting a sweep. Probably none of them should be here, and Desjournays usually wouldn't allow it with an afternoon game the following day, but this is for fun and nobody cares what they do as long as no one gets injured before the real games pick up again back home.

The sick feeling in his stomach had been bearable in Berlin because Hollander wasn't there. Ilya isn't sure if there is a geographical limit to how bad he feels thinking about Hollander, but separate cities seem to dampen it enough that he can still play decent hockey, as long as he's not in Montreal. Or Paris.

And Berlin was fun, in a way. Fun clubs. Another version of Ilya, who had never met and subsequently lost Shane Hollander and thus might know some peace in his lifetime, would have had an absolute blast there. Ilya had thought about trying to get into Berghain— alone, none of his meathead American teammates would have possibly been let in— but he didn't bother. Just didn't feel up to it. It would feel worse, he figured, to try to fuck and to discover that he was still miserably unable to do much more than picture Hollander's pretty face and feel sorry for himself. The games themselves had been fun, too. No challenge at all, but the Polar Bears had seemed happy enough just to play against them. They had gone out drinking all together, after, and the atmosphere was so effervescent and lively that Ilya had almost tricked himself into believing he understood some German. That feeling had carried him all the way through the flight to Paris and the bus ride and hotel check-in.

But that was before Ilya ran into Shane Hollander down the hall from Marley's room.

Someone sets a full beer down in front of him— Connie?— and Ilya picks it up automatically, and thinks of Hollander's face, the pure shock and the wide eyes and half-open mouth, so soft, the same expression Hollander sometimes wore when Ilya showed up at his hotel room, like he couldn't believe how Ilya looked. It would make Ilya feel powerful, proud of himself. Warm all over. He liked watching that expression melt off Hollander's face when Ilya kissed him, a reward for making Ilya feel so good about himself.

"Hollander looked fucking pissed," Marley had said, last night at the club, laughing about the fact that they had all the players from both teams so haphazardly assigned to the different floors.

He didn't look pissed at all, Ilya had thought, but knew he had no way to explain how he knew that to Marley. That he knew it because he had spent the last eight years studying Shane Hollander like it was his second job. Maybe it was. And he was bad at it, if so, because he hadn't seen Rose Landry coming at all, but he at least knew what that look on Hollander's face meant. And it didn't mean pissed.

Ilya had leaned up against the bar with Marley and wondered, seriously, if he could fuck Hollander this week, even with the movie star girlfriend. That's what that look had implied. Ilya wanted that to be enough to cure the churn in his stomach, that Hollander still would fuck him if Ilya tried.

The problem, Ilya thinks now, necking his beer so no one tries to talk to him, is that he doesn't think it is. Even if a miracle happens, and Ilya sends Hollander home to Rose Landry with the imprint of Ilya's cock still inside him, it feels somehow worse than nothing at all. Like a consolation prize. Ilya gets Hollander's body, and she gets *him*.

So he won't. And Hollander hasn't spoken to him, anyway, other than that *Hey* breathed out into the hallway between them. He's maybe avoiding Ilya on purpose, so that he isn't tempted.

Or maybe this isn't hard for him at all. Maybe Hollander can compartmentalize whatever attraction he feels for Ilya and go on with life easily, without it causing the same constant sickness in his gut that Ilya feels. Maybe he's saving himself just for Rose. Maybe it's become that serious between them.

The thought makes Ilya want to fast-forward through tomorrow's game and get the fuck out of Paris already. Another fun city, wasted. Another place that a different Ilya, an Ilya not chained to a man who has already relegated him to the past, would have probably loved. Sasha was right, in Sochi, when he said the women and the men are both beautiful here. But Ilya finishes his beer and calls an Uber back to the hotel early and blames the jet lag when his teammates protest. He doesn't want the beautiful men and beautiful women of Paris in his bed. Just one beautiful man, sleeping one floor above him, that he can't even have.

Ilya had been surprised at the roar of the crowd when he and Hollander had lined up for the first face-off. It had made him wonder if their rivalry has become so famous that it has managed to cross the Atlantic. The thought makes him feel good, in that even here, across the world from their respective cities, he and Hollander's names are linked together, if only in this way. And it also makes him feel terrible, because it's just another reminder that what Ilya wants, deep down where his stomach churns around it, is impossible. Even here, people are invested in their animosity.

Ilya lies in his bed and wishes, like he has too many times already, that he could rewind everything and go back to before Boston and convince himself never to try to invite Hollander to stay the night. He'd probably be fucking Hollander right now, if none of that had happened. Maybe it could still be fun. Zero stakes.

He might have to go back earlier for zero stakes, though. Before the summer, when he caught himself texting Hollander to ask what he fucking ate for dinner instead of dancing at the club with Sveta. Maybe before that, before his MVP win in Vegas, where he stayed up all night after Hollander left with his thoughts like a tornado in his mind and barely made it to his flight to Moscow at all. Maybe before he was inside Hollander for the first time. Maybe before Juniors. He met Hollander the first time he was ever in North America. Maybe he has to go all the way back to Russia, then. Maybe it's never been zero stakes, not since the moment Hollander's stupid earnest face was in his vision, beautiful freckles and overly

honest eyes and tiny soft smile and perfect white teeth. Maybe it's always meant too much to Ilya.

Ilya's phone rings in the dark. It's only when he sees Alexei's name on the screen that he feels humiliated for hoping it said *Jane* instead. He cuts the call, puts his phone on do-not-disturb. It's too late for it to be for anything good. His family never calls for anything good.

Ilya goes to sleep hoping that when he wakes up, he'll already be back in Boston, where maybe Paris and Hollander will be far enough away not to matter anymore.

Shane doesn't like to attribute much to luck. Sure, he's superstitious, to the extent all hockey players are; he can become downright psychotic during playoffs. But great players don't get that way by being lucky. They create the opportunities, they make the moves that allow luck to channel its way to them. A defenseman might fall for a deke, instead of reading the feint for what it is, but that isn't luck; that is strategy being executed correctly.

All that is to say, Shane does not attribute it entirely to luck when he heads out of the hotel the morning of their final game to grab a coffee and finds Ilya Rozanov smoking under the awning just beyond the entrance doors. He figured, if Ilya was smoking somewhere, he'd probably be doing it around now: early enough in the morning that he won't feel it in his lungs on the ice later, late enough that the sun has come out behind the ever-present gloom. If there is any bit of luck to it, it's that Rozanov chose to do it in such a conspicuous place, a happy coincidence that France seems to let people smoke just about anywhere they please.

Rozanov has athletic gear on, nothing audacious, not like what Shane saw him wearing in the hallway. As if he's trying to do the opposite, blend in to the scenery, the grey hotel and the grey morning, but it's probably not that. It's probably that he just came out for a smoke after his morning workout. He wouldn't be wearing dark clothes just to hide from someone, someone maybe like Shane.

Like always when he sees Rozanov, Shane's struck by how good he looks, how his body fills out his clothes, how his eyes and his hair play each other up until both look like they glow. This has always been part of why Shane is so afraid to be seen around him, because he knows how he must look, when he looks at Rozanov. He can't help how much he likes to just *look* at him, and it's all wrapped up in the complicating factor of their history, that Rozanov's bowed lips Shane likes to stare at have also been around his dick more times than Shane can probably count. That Shane knows what it feels like to sink his fingers into Rozanov's glowing blond hair and hold on for dear life.

Rozanov, in contrast, doesn't always start hot. His eyes don't always look glad to see Shane. Right now, he is doing that assessing thing with his gaze he sometimes does, looking Shane up and down, like an inspector at an auction. Measuring him, evaluating his worth, maybe. That look always makes Shane want to jut his chin out and straighten his spine, put on some kind of expression that shows he's fine with it, fine with Rozanov disassembling him with his

too-blue eyes and his fierce Slavic eyebrows. Like everything with Rozanov, Shane feels himself get incongruously turned on under his impassive gaze. He briefly wonders, not for the first time, if fucking him has turned Shane irreversibly into some kind of deviant.

“Hello, Hollander,” Rozanov says, his deep voice made deeper by the gravel of tobacco he’s been sucking into his lungs.

“Hi, Rozanov.”

Shane’s eyes flicker to the burning end of the cigarette, perched between Rozanov’s slightly pursed lips. He makes that expression sometimes, when he’s about to kiss Shane. And now that’s all Shane can think about, of course.

Rozanov catches the look and shakes his head. “Don’t say it.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Shane says, even though he probably was. *Smoking is bad for you* feels permanently poised to come out of his mouth around Rozanov.

Rozanov lifts his eyebrows, clearly disbelieving, correctly skeptical. Shane bites a smile down. He casts his eyes around them. The hotel is here because the stadium is here, and ‘here’ is not a particularly beautiful part of the city. It has the kind of nondescript, functional architecture of a place where tourists are not the focus. If not for the cafes dotting the street, unmistakably and ostentatiously French with scalloped fabric awnings and huddles of rattan bistro chairs, Shane and Rozanov could be standing anywhere, in almost any city.

But he’s casting around for something to say, to break the ice, and the city is a blessedly neutral topic.

“So, uh, how are you enjoying Paris so far?”

Rozanov shrugs with one shoulder, his face noncommittal.

“Is okay.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, nodding, trying to take the nearly nothing Rozanov is giving him and turn it into something. “Totally. Um...”

“What do you want, Hollander?” Rozanov says, wearily. Tired. Of Shane, already, maybe.

Shane puts his hands in his pockets. He wants to say the things he needs to say to Rozanov. That’s what he wants. But of course, that’s fucking impossible here. They are three meters from the hotel entrance, if that. People are coming in and out, and every time the doors open he catches a bit of loud conversation, and no matter how quietly he says it, he can’t say, *I’m gay, and not just gay, I’m in love with you, and not just gay and in love with you but also I want you to maybe do something about it*. Not here. He probably shouldn’t do it anywhere where anyone else could hear them either, but. But this is where they’ve found themselves, so maybe he can pivot. Maybe he can strategize.

Every other business on this street is a cafe, it seems. Shane was going to go back to the one he went to yesterday, but it’s kind of close; he could pick any of them, and maybe that would

be private enough, a cafe three blocks down instead of one.

“I was, um, going to get coffee,” he says. “Down the street, there’s a decent cafe.” Of course, he doesn’t know if that’s true, but it’s Paris, can any of the cafes here be worse than *decent*? “Do you want to...?”

Ilya’s gaze softens a little, shifts a little closer to the expression he wears when he arrives at Shane’s door versus when he leaves. He takes the cigarette from his lips, seems poised to say something. Then, the entrance doors open again, someone from the Raiders. A guy from the management team, not a player, but wearing enough conspicuous Boston gear as to be unmistakable. Stepping outside to take a call, or grab a smoke, too, or a coffee. He taps Rozanov on his shoulder as he passes, and Shane can see Rozanov’s wince, his eyes flinching at the touch. He looks away from Shane, as if even making eye contact is too dangerous under observation.

“No,” Rozanov says, when the staff member has walked far enough away that he won’t be overheard. “We can’t.”

“Okay,” Shane says, and he understands, he really does. He just doesn’t have any better ideas. He can’t figure out how to maneuver this. His luck has apparently run out.

He already said he was getting coffee, was planning to even before he ran into Rozanov, so now he has to turn around and walk away down the street and know that Rozanov is going to watch him the entire time, smoking his cigarette in a way that makes it feel like an indictment of Shane.

“Is too much caffeine for you, I think,” Rozanov says, a tiny smile creeping up one side of his face.

“You’re one to talk,” Shane says, mouth quirking up to match, and he feels warm, the way he always does when Rozanov makes a joke at his expense. Warm in multiple ways, since that’s all wrapped up in their history, too.

“Goodbye, Hollander.”

“Yeah. See you, Rozanov.”

Shane turns around once more, when he’s safely down the street, and sees Rozanov has been joined by a couple of teammates out front. So he was right to say no, they couldn’t. Shane turns back quickly, hustles to the first cafe he comes across, doesn’t care at all what he said about going to one further away. It doesn’t matter.

He’ll talk to Rozanov later, he thinks. There will be another chance.

But they don’t get another chance. Their final game on French ice starts rather early, which doesn’t seem to be a problem for the audience in attendance, maybe because ice hockey is a rarity here and the French fans don’t mind that the schedule is bizarre. First puck dropped before eleven AM— another thing that has Shane off kilter during his time abroad. Chalk it up to culture shock.

He thinks about Rozanov the entire game, how he's going to talk to him, whether he'll get a chance at all. The schedule is brutally tight; they have a weird lunch for both teams, a show of intermural camaraderie, so Shane has to shower and change right after the game, so no chance to talk in between. There's not a lot of time after lunch, either, before both teams head to the airport and Shane to his brand meeting, but maybe that's the only opportunity they will have.

He'll text him. That's the way that's always worked for them, isn't it? That's the correct strategy. Shane just has to trust that Rozanov will answer. That he wasn't saying *No, we can't* about anything more than the coffee.

Because they have to. They have to talk. Shane doesn't know what he's supposed to do otherwise. Doesn't know how to just go back to Montreal if Rozanov and what he thinks and what he feels about Shane is still a giant question mark, swirling over both of their heads.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading and leaving wonderful comments, I got overwhelmed on my last fic and stopped being good about responding after 50+ of them, but I read all of them and I love them so much, they really motivate me to write when other people express interest in the story! I'll try to do better at responding to them as they come in, since it really gets out of control very quickly, and i'm so under the radar in this fandom. No idea how other people do it!

All that is to say, please leave a comment or kudos if you like the fic. And thank you <3 Y'all are the best.

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](https://scacao-blog.tumblr.com/). Come say hi to me over there!

Chapter 2: If the word doesn't exist, invent it

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya, a hotel room, a conversation.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back!

Chapter title is a quote from Charles Baudelaire.

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

The afternoon game is fine. Boston wins, 3-2. Certainly not Ilya's best performance, but it's an exhibition match, which is how Ilya can pretend to himself that it isn't Hollander that makes him play like shit lately. He used to play his best games against Montreal, used to let the anticipation of fucking Hollander after bleed into the competition that always came before, give it an edge it never got anywhere else. That was a mistake, probably, because now the two are inextricably linked; Ilya can't be his best at one anymore without the other. Well, add it to the pile of his other mistakes.

It's almost over, at least. They have one more mandatory event— catered lunch at the hotel, with both teams, tucked away in some banquet hall— before they head back to the airport and Ilya can put this behind him until the next time he and Hollander have to face each other.

It will be miserable, of course, being in a room with Hollander, but Ilya will survive it. He survived this morning, when Hollander appeared out of nowhere to ruin a perfectly good smoke break. He survived the red of Hollander's cheeks in the morning cold making his freckles glow. He survived the way Hollander had absently wrinkled his nose when he sniffed. He could survive one more bit of torture.

It's a waste, though. To be in Paris with Hollander and not even get to fuck him. To not ever get to fuck him again, maybe.

Ilya arrives first for lunch, which he was hoping not to do. He was first and foremost hoping for assigned seating. Barring that, he was hoping to have Hollander's presence in the room already to act as a guide, whether Ilya decided to avoid him or sit near him. He feels a little unmoored, knowing Hollander will appear at some point, not knowing when. It's open

seating, which Ilya thinks was a little optimistic of the organizers. As if they planned for some of the guys not to sit with their own teams. Just a quick scan of the room and he can see that isn't how it's shaking out.

Riley and Marley wave him over to their table, and Hollander isn't here, so Ilya has no good reason not to sit down with them.

A waiter comes for his drink order, and he is in the middle of giving it when Hollander walks in unceremoniously, flanked by Hayden Pike and a Metros blueliner with a bushy mullet that Ilya thinks is named Kelson. Ilya deliberately does not look their way, studies the prix fixe menu as if it will impart great secrets to him.

Whether deliberate or just a joke on the part of the universe, the three of them take seats at the table directly behind Ilya's. Hollander is a scant distance behind Ilya, closer still when he pulls the chair out to sit down. If Ilya reached back just a little, he might brush his fingers against Hollander's, under the table. If he turns around, Ilya thinks he might be able to smell his cologne.

The food is good, the steak exactly as rare as Ilya likes it, which is hard to achieve in the United States. Americans love everything just slightly too done, but the French seem to believe meat should be kissed rather than cooked. The beer doesn't do much for his misery, but it's delicious, too. The conversation at his table flows mostly around and through him. Ilya can easily hear Hollander talking to Pike and Kelson, and occasionally his laughter rises up and floats across Ilya's table and catches in the softest part of Ilya's gut.

Just a little bit of torture that he must endure, Ilya thinks, and wonders if he can die from this, from being so close to something he wants and cannot have. Maybe the death comes later, on the flight home, this proximity to Hollander a slow-acting poison whose effects are only recognized after it is too late.

Kelson is talking, too loudly, about getting laid last night, laying out stats about bra size and hair color like he's doing color commentary on the contenders for MVP. Maybe this works on Pike, Ilya doesn't particularly care to know, but he thinks he hears Hollander clear his throat, which does nothing to deter Kelson from continuing.

"City of love, huh boys? Wish you could've brought your girl, Hollzy?"

Hayden Pike says, "Dude, be nice. What the fuck?"

"Hayd..." Shane says.

"What?" Kelson says, like he can't read the fucking room. Ilya isn't even looking at the three of them, and he can tell Kelson is missing something obvious. Then, he says, "You're not with Rose Landry anymore?"

Ilya stops eating. Marley is complaining about something, his head hurting or his girlfriend bitching at him on the phone, something stupid that Ilya completely ignores. The conversation at the table behind him has suddenly become the most important thing in the world. Ilya wants to elbow Marley hard enough in the ribs that it shuts him up entirely.

“Dude,” Pike says.

“Yeah, I’m not...” Shane says. “We’re not...”

“Wait, what the fuck happened?” Kelson says.

“Nothing *happened*,” Shane says emphatically. “It just didn’t work out.” Pike must make some expression at Kelson that Ilya can’t see, because Shane says, “Hayd, it’s okay. It was a while ago. We’re still friends. We just weren’t compatible.”

It feels pointed in Ilya’s direction, meant for him to overhear. But Ilya knows he’s mistaken. Knows he’s not really meant to hear any of this. It’s just that everything has felt targeted to him, specifically. Every paparazzi photo, every drug store celebrity magazine, every cloying early morning gossip show. Ilya feels like the sole intended audience for every one. *He’s gone, you idiot, he’s found someone better who he doesn’t have to hide. Ilya Rozanov, are you listening?* And of course, he has been. He spent this very morning reading through *Hollywood Insider* tweets like a fucking moron, wanting to throw himself into the Seine, unable to stop.

But that’s not what Shane is saying now, in a way that is loud enough for him to hear, but that must be his imagination, that must just be because Ilya is straining to hear every word of this conversation with his fork frozen halfway to his mouth. *Didn’t work out. Still friends. Not compatible.* Ilya is going to need to look that word up later, but just for posterity’s sake; it’s obvious enough what Shane is talking about. These are not the things you say about the love of your life, present tense, caught on fire with passion. These are things you say about an ex. Past tense. Moved on. *Not compatible* sounds final in a way that makes Ilya want to turn around in his chair and grab Shane by the back of the neck and demand to know if that means what Ilya thinks it does.

“Man, what the fuck is *compatible*? She’s fucking hot as fuck, bro. She’s like, naked in all the X-Squad movies. I wouldn’t even notice if she had two heads.”

Pike says, “You’re such an asshole, Kels.”

Kelson is undeterred. “Who gives a shit about compatibility? Tell me you at least fucked her before you started talking about fucking compatibility.” He laughs in a way that makes Ilya sincerely wish he had checked him face-first into the boards earlier. He wouldn’t be laughing with his mouth swollen shut. “Can’t believe you fumbled Rose fucking Landry, Holls. You’re a fucking legend, dude.”

“Okay, Kels. Thanks,” Shane says.

“Seriously, Kels,” Hayden says.

“I’m just beating your balls, dude. All right, you boys wanna get out of here? I gotta pack my shit before the flight.”

Ilya listens to the three of them push out their chairs and rise together, rooted to the spot. Hollander is going to leave. Hollander is leaving, right now, he’s halfway to the doors and

Ilya is still fucking frozen and all he can think is, he can't let him leave. Not without talking to him. Not when this is the first time in months that he's felt like he might be able to sleep tonight, to breathe even, if he just hears Hollander say those words directly to him.

We're still friends. Just not compatible. It didn't work out. You're not too late, Ilya Rozanov. Maybe you can still reach out and take what you want, or at least ask for it.

Ilya's lungs have felt empty since that night at the club in Montreal, like he's sunk to the bottom of the ocean. He's sick to death of his bedroom ceiling, of the way it swims in his vision in the dark. He can't let Hollander leave.

But he also can't get up, and just run after him and his little group of Montreal fucks like that makes any sense at all in the world they live in. Shane Hollander's personal life is supposed to have absolutely no bearing on Ilya Rozanov's emotional state, let alone be its sole salvation or destruction. Ilya Rozanov is not supposed to care if Shane Hollander is dating a beautiful, famous woman, or is in love with her, or that it *didn't work out*. It isn't supposed to be, in fact, the only thing that has mattered to him since last November.

Ilya watches the back of Hollander's head as he follows his teammates out the door, as conversation swirls around him. Their flight is at seven; he thinks he heard the Metros leave at eight. They're going to have to leave soon, themselves, to collect their belongings and get on the chartered bus and ride two hours in the godawful *périphérique* traffic and Ilya is going to miss his chance, it's already too late.

Just at the door, Hollander turns, and looks at him. Ilya can tell there are a thousand things unsaid in the look itself. He just doesn't know what the fuck any of those things are.

And then Hayden Pike puts his hand on Hollander's shoulder, steering him out the door, and he's gone.

Ilya puts his fork down on his plate, and thinks about how long he has to reasonably wait before he can sprint out of the room and chase Hollander down the hall. How much time he can leave him to walk ahead, where Ilya can stretch the socially acceptable distance between them but not lose him entirely. But then, there is the problem of his teammates. Ilya can already imagine the wide-eyed look of horror Shane would have on his face if Ilya ran up to him—grabbed him by the wrist, crowded him into the wall—in front of his *team*.

Fuck. He's going to have to do something, quickly. He's going to have to say something to Marley on his right and Riley on his left and push out his chair calmly and quickly and make his way to the door equally calmly and equally quickly, quicker probably if he still wants to catch Hollander before he disappears—

Ilya's phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out, flips it over.

[Jane]

8370

Can we talk?

Relief washes over Ilya in a tidal wave. He had almost, in some of his more self-destructive moments, convinced himself Hollander had deleted his phone number. That Hollander's *Here* from his visit to Ilya's house in Boston would be the last thing they ever said to one another. Now, at least, when Ilya feels like torturing himself in the future, he can look at *Can we talk?* And maybe it will carry the same weight it does now, every word in the phrase heavy with promise, with potential.

Ilya texts back *OK*, and shoves his fork in his mouth. He pretends to listen to Marley saying thank god it's still their bye week, because he hasn't slept right since they flew into Berlin, and he knows it's going to get him on the other end too, back in Boston. He gives it four, five minutes. Then, he stands up, excuses himself from the table.

The entire walk, from the table to the door to the hall to the elevator to the eighth floor to the hallway again to room number 8370, Ilya thinks he doesn't even breathe. Doesn't remember walking it. Ilya has his phone out the entire time, looking at *Can we talk?* Like it's a compass, a map pointing to where he can go to just be all right again. He stands at the door and runs his hands along the sides of his hair, pushes everything back, takes a breath. And knocks.

Hollander opens the door quickly enough that Ilya knows he was waiting on the other side for him. It's a heady sort of feeling, to know that Hollander might feel a fraction of what Ilya feels right now, that he might not have spent the last few months carefree and fucked-out and happily breaking Ilya's heart. It's the first time Ilya has considered that maybe it's been terrible for him, too.

"Hey," Hollander says, once Ilya is inside his room.

"Hi."

Hollander is wearing a navy blue *Montreal Metros* hoodie and black joggers, air travel gear if Ilya ever saw it, and he looks fucking delicious; Ilya wants to reach for him and suck on the bit of exposed skin where the hoodie strings meet at his neck. He crosses to the foot of the bed and turns, eyebrows up as if expectant: what are we doing here? He's half-hard just from the sense memory of a hundred hotel rooms before, the dissonance of being back here again with Hollander, after all Ilya convinced himself of. That this would never happen again, the two of them alone, pretending they weren't about to end up in bed for all of thirty seconds before reaching for each other and falling to the mattress.

"Can you, uh, sit down?" Hollander says.

"You really want to talk?" Ilya says, showing his teeth in his smile. "You were not just saying this?"

"No, I wasn't," Hollander says, thumbs hooked into his pockets. "Um, there's some stuff I want to say."

Ilya snorts, but sits heavily down on the bed, on one neatly tucked-in corner. He pats the space next to him. Hollander stares at where Ilya's hand rests for a long moment, then moves

to the bed and sits down beside him, albeit a little farther away than Ilya was maybe hoping for.

“First off, I wanted to say sorry for freaking out, the last time we were together.”

It’s one thing for Ilya to hear it in his own mind, playing over the afternoon countless times; it’s entirely another to have Hollander admit it– he *did* freak out, because of what happened between them, the way *Shane* had slipped past Ilya’s lips like water through a leak in a dam.

“Hm.”

“I’ve been... figuring some stuff out these last couple of months.”

“Ah. Stuff. Stuff like Rose Landry?”

The name comes out almost of its own volition. It isn’t that Ilya wants to talk about, or think about, or even hear the name *Rose Landry* ever again. It’s that he didn’t really hear this from Hollander, not *directly*. He may have overheard it, may have even been meant to overhear it, but Ilya suddenly needs to hear it come out of Hollander’s mouth, with Hollander’s eyes looking into his eyes, and see how Hollander’s lips shape the words, see the way his face looks when he says it. Because he needs to know it’s true, unequivocally. He needs to know.

“No,” Hollander says quickly, emphatically. Then, quieter, “Well, yes. Kind of.”

“You are not together with her anymore,” Ilya says. He tries to make it sound declarative, like he’s willing it to be so.

“No,” Hollander says.

The blood rushes into Ilya’s head, his chest. Makes him feel briefly lightheaded. Just a simple word, but it seems to have the power to bring Ilya back to life. Funny, and pathetic.

“And that is because?” Ilya hears himself say.

Ilya shouldn’t ask any more about it, shouldn’t care, because the most important thing is already known: that Shane Hollander is not with Rose Landry, the superstar actress. Ilya has maybe an hour before he has to be on a bus, heading to Charles de Gaulle. He doesn’t have the time to belabor the point, not if he wants to taste the sweat on Hollander’s thighs and have it stick to his teeth the whole flight back to Boston. He should be getting on with things, should be reaching for Hollander’s throat and lining his tongue up along the slip of Hollander’s red lips.

But Hollander looks like he has more to say, looks like he’s bursting with the need to say it. And Ilya is dangerously weak for him, and so he’ll talk, like Hollander so clearly wants to.

Hollander looks at him, lip caught between his teeth, brows furrowed. Lethally adorable. Ilya wants to reach out and smooth out the worried lines in his forehead with his fingers.

“It’s because I’m gay, Rozanov,” he says.

He says it to the man for whom he's been spreading his legs for the last eight years, like Ilya is going to judge him or shun him for it. Shane has come just from sucking Ilya's dick, and looked up at him from between his knees like he was fucking proud of himself for it, but he's worried about what Ilya thinks of him being *gay*.

Ilya thinks, not for the first time, that Shane Hollander might be actually insane.

"Yes," Ilya says. "I probably could have told you that."

"Shut up, Rozanov," Hollander says. "God, you're such an asshole."

Ilya is going to kiss him in five more seconds. Less, if Hollander calls him an asshole again. It's been months without this. Months where he would have given anything just to hear Hollander tell him to shut up.

He stretches his hand out on the bedspread, crawls it over to where Hollander's hand is splayed out, covers it, palm gliding over rough knuckles and fingers intertwining with Hollander's. Hollander's eyes flicker to their hands and then back up to him, through his thick eyelashes.

"It's not just that, though," Hollander says. "It's not just being *gay*."

No, Ilya suspected it was not just that. It's not just being gay that made Hollander run out of his house in a panic. Ilya himself has been pointedly trying not to think about it, as if the only reason he can't sleep at night since he saw Hollander with Rose Landry is because he's been worried about missing out on a sure thing. Not Shane Hollander, specifically. Not Shane. Ilya hasn't been able to get hard with anyone since then, and that is a verdict in and of itself. His body is telling him what the truth is even if he's been trying to ignore it.

And he hasn't let himself think about it because he knows it's fucking impossible, and naming it isn't going to change that. It isn't going to change that they can't do anything about it. But there is a part of him that likes to hurt. That likes to do impulsive, self-destructive things, like sneak out of the house when he knew his father would beat him for it and give Sasha a blowjob in the locker rooms at age fourteen when he knew Coach could come in at any moment. That part of him desperately wants Hollander to say it out loud. Say what this is between them, name it, give it the power to destroy them both.

"Then, what is it?" Ilya says.

Hollander's eyes are big and dark and searching, and the part of Ilya that wants to hurt is aching for it. For Hollander to tell him this isn't just about sex. That he felt what Ilya felt too, these last few months. Like he was dying. Like half of Hollander's heart had also been ripped out; that he had also been reduced to staggering around his city like a zombie.

But they are interrupted by the pushy buzz of Hollander's phone in his pocket. Hollander takes it out and scowls at the caller ID.

"Fuck!" Hollander says. He picks up the call, and speaks a quick line of casually loose, fluent French to whoever is on the other end, sounding calm but running a hand too quickly through

his hair as he hangs up.

“What is it?”

Hollander looks miserable. “I have to go. It’s the fucking— it’s the guys from Dior. I’m talking to them about a stupid brand thing. The car is downstairs.”

Ilya considers Hollander’s clothes, which were apparently chosen for a fancy advertising meeting and not, as he suspected, for lounging around on an eight hour transatlantic flight. The thought of Hollander in an ad for Dior is, frankly, insane. Ilya wonders if Dior has decided to branch out into athletic gear, gym shorts and tank tops. That’s the only way he can see this making sense.

But Hollander is already off the bed, shoving things from his dresser into a backpack, so it seems like Dior is somehow serious about this. And that means another thing, too.

“You’re not going home with your team?”

“No, I’m staying another night for this. We figured I had the time because it’s still a bye week. No games until Tuesday.”

Ilya can see the door shutting on their conversation, and the realization tightens unexpectedly like a vise in his chest. They’ve still barely said anything to each other. They’ve barely gotten started on closing the yawning distance that opened up between them last November and has been growing, metastasizing outward, ever since. Ilya’s lips are still dry. He’s going to leave Paris without even the reminder of what Hollander’s kiss tastes like.

“What were you going to say?” Ilya says.

Hollander pauses in his hasty preparation to leave, and looks at him, like he’s just been reminded that he’s there. Ilya feels a hot little stab of anger. He ought to push him up against the wall and show him he isn’t so easy to forget.

“I’m sorry, Rozanov,” Hollander says, “I really have to go. The car is here.”

“You said we needed to talk.”

“Yeah, we really do. We *really* do. *Fuck*.” Hollander is suddenly right in front of him, close enough that Ilya can reach out and touch him, pull him down to the bed, if he really wants to. He wonders if that’s what Hollander wants him to do. “You have to go soon, right? Your plane is also leaving today. *Fuck*.”

Ilya has an insane idea. An idea that fomented in his mind as he stares up at Hollander’s stormy eyes, weighted by a million unsaid things. Things that, suddenly, Ilya thinks he can’t leave Paris without hearing.

Ilya stands up, pulls out his phone. He holds it out, in the scant space between their bodies, so Hollander can watch him. And he types into google: *Paris to Boston flights*. Clicks the first link, which he thinks is Air France but he doesn’t pause to make sure. Plugs into the search box: *I passenger. Nonstop. Afternoon*. And selects tomorrow’s date.

Hollander is silent throughout. Even as Ilya flies through the purchase. Even as his thumb hovers, then presses down on *Purchase Ticket*. Hollander's eyes are locked on Ilya's phone screen.

"There," Ilya says, when the confirmation screen slides up. He pockets his phone again, and then their faces are inches apart. Breaths apart, only. "Now we have some time to talk."

"Holy shit," Hollander says. His phone starts to ring again. He has it in his hands, but he doesn't move to answer it.

Ilya reaches out, fingers drawn like a magnet to Hollander's jaw, weeks of wanting directing him where to place them. He runs his thumb along the ridge of Hollander's lower lip, pressing it down just so, until he can feel the wetness beneath it. Hollander's gaze softens. His phone rings and cuts and begins to ring again.

"See you when you get back," Ilya says.

Hollander breathes in, out. Nods at him, like he's taking Ilya's words as direction. He goes to the door, opens it, scans both sides of the hallway for anyone who might spot them. He turns back and gives Ilya another small nod, a universal *coast is clear*, and holds the door open for Ilya to slip past him.

Ilya has been temporarily hypnotized by being in Hollander's presence, after so long. By the bodily shock of hearing him say, past tense, that he and Rose Landry *didn't work out*. By the fact that his eyes are darker than Ilya remembers, his voice softer, his lips fuller. Or at least, that must be what has happened, because it takes Ilya until he's back in his room, a full journey from Hollander's room to the hall to the elevator and out another floor, to really think about what the fuck he just did.

A plane ticket. He just pushed his return off for no reason that he thinks his coach won't be pissed off to hear. Thank god it's a bye week, he thinks, like Marleau's jet-lagged self pity. Desjournays would murder him otherwise, or tie him to the bus and haul him on the plane, anyway. He's going to have to come up with something no one can push back on him for—family, maybe, they are in Europe, after all. He'll lie and say his brother is in town. He never talks about his brother, because he hates him—well, *hates* is the easiest word to reach for, at least—and that comes in handy now, because no one knows that. For all they know, he misses Alexei and has arranged for them to meet in Paris for the only free night Ilya's had so far.

That will do, Ilya thinks. Probably.

But that's not really what's so fucking crazy about all this, he thinks. He just bought a plane ticket, so he could have one more night with Hollander. So Hollander can tell him what he meant to say, but didn't get the chance to. He's never done this in his life, for anyone, for anything. He's never looked at anyone before and thought, *I just want more time*. Hollander is the first. The only.

Ilya stares at his bag, still laid open and askew, at the foot of his bed, and resists the urge to kick it, like it's at fault for the big, open wound he's proudly displayed to Hollander. *Here I*

am, I want more of you, and I am so desperate for it that I will stay here in Paris and wait for it. Like he's Shane Hollander's fucking dog, laying outside the house in the rain for three months, waiting to be let back in, pawing at the door. *Fuck.*

Ilya thinks of the way Hollander stared at the phone as Ilya bought the ticket, the wide-eyed surprise, the *holy shit*. He seemed pretty torn up at the thought of not having enough time to tell Ilya what he wanted to say, too. That should be pretty terrifying, the potential weight of whatever it is Ilya has just bought a ticket to hear. And it is, it *is*.

But it's also, maybe, the only thing Ilya has ever wanted. Since he first unwrapped Shane Hollander, like a present, at age nineteen. And after, they will have an entire night together. He can stay there, if Hollander will let him. No one will know.

Fuck.

Ilya checks his phone. He has to swipe away from the confirmation page of the Air France website in order to check his messages, and just seeing the ticket and the message there sends a little jolt to his heart. The group chat is exploding; his teammates are congregating downstairs at the lobby, ready to get carted off to the airport.

Ilya blows out a breath and presses *call* on Desjourneys' phone number, already thinking of the evening, when his coach and his team and all of the things that make this thing with Hollander impossible will be far away, unable to touch them.

Shane barely pays attention through the meeting with the Dior representatives. His mom has assured him that the contract is not contingent on face time with the brand, that it was appreciated but not mandatory, and Shane can sort of see why, now that he's in the room with them. They care about him because his face is all over Rolex. They care about him because he's the one presentable hockey player anyone can name. They don't care about *him* so much. They want someone who can wear their menswear to the sports documentary red carpets Shane gets invited to, someone who has a faithful, if niche following, and will never get caught by the tabloids hiring a prostitute or beating his wife. Not that there isn't the sort of thing in Shane's private life that he worries might be just as bad as any of that.

His mom had asked him how he feels about the contract, but he doesn't care. He didn't care about the sports drink he advertised and has never drank. He didn't care about Rolex. He remembers the contract with Reebok mostly when he forgets and wears Adidas in public instead. If she wants him to do a Dior campaign, he'll do it. She's the one who cares; he's the one who, apparently, has the face for advertising.

So it's not a surprise to him that his mind wanders during the meeting and he thinks, incessantly, of Rozanov in his hotel room. He flips through brand marketing material, pages of colors and recent seasons and inspiration boards laid out in front of him, and all he can

think about is Rozanov's thumb hovering over and pressing down on a button that said *Purchase Ticket*, and his smile when he said they have time to talk now.

Just the thought of it makes his throat feel dry, and his stomach clench. It's just that it feels so *big*. Rozanov is staying an extra night for *him*. He wonders what Rozanov will tell his coach—they didn't have a chance to talk about that. He wonders whether Rozanov will say anything. Maybe he treats his coaches the same way he treats Shane, and just offers a shrug when he doesn't want to give them an explanation for something. Shane has heard Desjournays is a hardass, but maybe things are different when you're Ilya Rozanov. Maybe the world opens up for him as easily as Shane does.

If Rozanov had kissed him, in the hotel, with his phone in his hand and the driver from Dior ringing him off the hook, Shane thinks he might have let him do whatever he wanted, meetings be damned. He hopes, really hopes, that Rozanov doesn't try to kiss him before he's said what he wants to say to him. The way his heart and his body feel right now is perfectly aligned—both are hungry and neglected. Shane doesn't think he could stand the incongruity anymore, the times when his body feels so good that he's worried he may have been built specifically to be fucked by Ilya Rozanov, and his heart is wrung out and empty and feels like a gaping wound.

Before he had that talk with Rose in the restaurant, he was used to that feeling, thought it was the normal course of events when you were addicted to the sort of sex you were also deeply ashamed to have. When you kind of despised yourself for being hung up on an asshole who kissed you exactly like you longed to be kissed, fucked you like you longed to be fucked, then didn't contact you until the next time he wanted to get his dick wet.

Everything is different now, though. That's why he has to talk to Rozanov, because he can't do it anymore, can't continue on like they have all this time. And Rozanov just gave him an entire night, just because he said he needed to talk. That has to mean something. Maybe it doesn't mean as much as Shane wants it to mean, but it isn't nothing.

“Shane?”

Shane pulls his attention back to the binders, the colors, the meeting. Several pairs of eyes are looking at him expectantly.

“Sorry,” he says. “Can you repeat that?”

It's cold and grey outside when he reaches for his phone later, back in the car on the way back to the hotel. The street still carries the sheen of yesterday's rain on it. There is a certain eternal quality to the overcast sky and perpetually wet roads. The sun comes out late and it's hidden by grey when it does. The sunset is more of a shadowing of the gloom than anything else. Shane isn't really sure what time it is as a result. The time between when he left the hotel last and now has felt both too long and too short.

The driver had asked if there was anywhere else he wanted to be dropped off, which had felt like a fucking crazy thing to imagine. Anywhere he wanted to go that wasn't right back to Rozanov.

His mom calls five minutes after he gets in the car, sounding chipper and business-like.

“Hi sweetie, how did it go?”

“It went fine,” Shane says, and then, because he knows his mom won’t like *fine*, he adds, “it was good, Mom.”

“Good. This is a really good opportunity, Shane. This could really open things up for the rest of LVMH if it’s successful.” She catches herself and adds, “if you want to work with them, of course.”

This is the little act they play out every time. Shane pretends he’s invested; his mom pretends to prioritize his personal feelings about fucking advertising. Shane’s not mad, *per se*. He just sort of wishes he didn’t have to have the conversation anymore. He doesn’t know, and doesn’t want to learn, what LVMH is.

“Sure, Mom. That sounds great.”

“Okay. How is Paris?”

Shane looks out at the wet, grey boulevard. A drizzle has started up, judging by the flecks of water on the car window.

“Raining.”

“Have you been out at all? Seeing the sights? You have some time now, at least,” she says. “Well, I guess it’s not so great to sightsee in the rain. Oh! What about the Louvre? Is that still open?” He hears shuffling, which probably means his mom has put him on speaker and slipped on her glasses to read the screen. “What time is it there?”

His mom is never fully able to let the manager part of their relationship take a backseat. Shane thinks he better rein her in before she buys him tickets he will definitely not use. “Yeah, Mom. That sounds cool. Maybe I can go to the Louvre for an hour or two.”

“What was that, honey?” His mom’s voice muffles a bit and he hears the unintelligible rumble of his dad’s voice from somewhere else in the room. “Oh, your dad says ‘don’t just spend the whole day at the hotel’. I couldn’t agree more! Go enjoy Paris!”

“I will, Mom. Do you guys want anything?”

“I don’t know, surprise us! Your father says ‘bring back a nice Cognac’.”

“All right. Love you. Bye.”

Shane cuts the call and stares out the window. He wonders if the driver understood or cared about him lying to his parents, which he knows is irrational. But he has the urge, for a moment, to confirm that he’s still taking Shane back to the hotel. He’s not going to the fucking Louvre.

He doesn't ask, because of course the driver wouldn't turn them around just on the power of his mother's suggestion. It's just. He has to get back to the hotel. He has to get back to Rozanov. Nothing else in Paris matters to him at all.

Ilya takes a shower and pulls out the last of his remaining clean clothes while he waits for Hollander to return. Black sweater, black Adidas track pants, a rather incongruous combo. He doesn't expect Hollander to make any comments. Although, Ilya noticed he was dressed a little nicer for the walk-in that morning than he remembers Hollander normally caring to. The thought that Rose Landry may have influenced Hollander's style in a permanent way makes him briefly nauseous, whether Hollander says he's gay or not. Ilya wants nothing more than her entire existence to be vanished from Hollander's consciousness, to never have happened. It will take his nervous system longer than a single afternoon to forget the way their paparazzi photos made him feel.

Desjournays bought Ilya's excuse to stay, or at least pretended to. It's not a huge deal, in the end; people sometimes stay a day late at the All Star Game too, especially if it's hosted somewhere warm. Ilya was able to add another night to the reservation with just a call from the room phone. No problem. Easy.

The team chat has, of course, decided that Ilya is shacking it up tonight with some French girl, and it's a convenient story to play into. Ilya flips between the Boston group texts and Hollander's, trying not to pace his room, forcing himself to sit down at the foot of his bed when he notices himself starting to.

It feels like ages before he gets the text that Hollander is back at the hotel. Ilya texts, *Should I come up?* And Hollander replies, *Give me a few minutes*, which feels suggestive enough that Ilya double checks he's still got condoms in his pocket. When Hollander finally says it's okay, Ilya bounds out the door, has to check himself on the walk down Hollander's hallway, make sure he's not sprinting, make sure it isn't quite so obvious that he's been waiting with fucking bated breath for Hollander's return.

Hollander is back to looking vaguely nervous, and leads him to sit down on the bed, like he's recreating their beats from before. This time, Ilya doesn't wait to reach out and run his thumb over the back of Hollander's hand. Hollander closes his eyes and leans his head back, exhales a breath through his nose.

"I am really sorry about Boston," Hollander starts.

Ilya snorts. "Yes. You said this already."

"Yeah, I know." Hollander opens his eyes. "But I feel like shit about it, so I'm saying it again."

“Okay,” Ilya says, too softly to sound mean. Too much rawness bleeds into the word to have any bite. Ilya looks down at their hands, touching on the bed. “I made a mistake, too.” *Shane* was a mistake. A costly one, that he’s been paying for ever since.

Hollander’s fingers squeeze into his.

“No, you didn’t, *Ilya*.”

Hollander’s— Shane’s— gaze is fixed on their intertwined fingers, their overlapping hands. Ilya can just make out the half-moons of brown beneath Shane’s thick lashes. Ilya can’t tell if Shane means to look as sad as he does when he says Ilya’s name. If he’s sad because of November, of the time they spent apart since. Or, instead, because there is a specific kind of agony in being together like this.

“Shane...”

“I really like you,” Shane says. “I can’t pretend I don’t anymore.”

It’s so earnest that it’s almost cruel. Shane is so open, too open. Too open for Ilya to remember that they can’t. *He* can’t. There are a million reasons, and too many of them are caught up in the angry texts on his phone, the confused calls late at night, Moscow time. Pill bottles and forgotten appointments and the inevitable end, the grim duty of burying his father, that he can’t escape from even in a hotel in Paris where no one who knows them is near.

And Shane doesn’t know this, any of it, because Ilya has never told him. Hasn’t wanted him to know. The version of Ilya that Shane knows has been carefully curated until now, an amalgamation of things Ilya thinks Shane wants. Confident and strong and cocky and never afraid, never self-doubting, never anything but someone Shane can see his own glory reflected back in.

Shane probably does not want the version of Ilya that includes the hurts and fears and shame. Of course he likes the one that he knows, the one that is never weak. The thought makes Ilya suddenly want to lash out, or cry.

“You don’t even know me, Shane,” he says.

Shane makes an exasperated noise. “Can you please not be an asshole, for once?”

What would happen, if Ilya told him everything? About his family, his father. The fact that his passport feels like a death sentence, sometimes. That he feels like a prized racehorse, valuable only insofar as he can make himself useful. The minute he can’t perform, he’s going to be taken out back and shot. First plane back to Moscow. This life is a dream, but one with a marked expiration date.

Ilya is afraid he knows what would happen, if he did, and it turned out Shane didn’t mind that part of him, too. He would convince himself that this impossible thing between them could somehow work, that they could find a way to be together. But he’s thought of all the possibilities, and there isn’t a way.

But it hasn't stopped him from being miserable, this entire time, thinking Shane was already gone. It probably is already too late. Too much of Ilya is wrapped up in Shane. That doesn't make this any less impossible, but Ilya is going to get hurt either way.

"Does it matter?" he says. He can see Shane flinch out of the corner of his eye. "What will it change, if I say I like you, too?"

Shane fixes onto the wrong part of that sentence.

"You like me?"

Ilya looks to where Shane is staring at him, big doe eyes, pitched brows. Ilya has no defense against the expression on his face. Shane looks blown apart, like Ilya's words are a revelation, instead of the worst kept secret in the fucking world. He doesn't know what else to do, except reach out and cradle that pretty face, run his thumb along those flushed lips, and watch Shane's eyes soften as soon as Ilya's fingertips make contact, like he's been waiting for it all along.

"Isn't it fucking obvious?" Ilya says.

Shane smiles; Ilya feels it against the pad of his thumb. His cheek presses into Ilya's hand.

"Nothing is obvious with you, Ilya."

It's going to hurt either way. Ilya figures he might as well make the hurt worth it.

He pulls Shane toward him and Shane comes so willingly that Ilya has to press his eyes shut to keep the sting out of them. He pushes his tongue into Shane's mouth, so warm, better even than he remembered. Clean and wet, and immediately responsive, Shane's tongue sliding against his like an offensive maneuver, like Shane's idea of kissing is just like his idea of hockey—competitive, trying to steal possession.

Ilya pushes him down toward the bed, rucks his hoodie up and spreads his hands all along Shane's body, trying to touch everywhere at once. Shane lets him, craning his neck back as an invitation for Ilya to put teeth to Adam's apple, bite into the junction of his neck and jaw. Soft skin and rough stubble under his tongue.

"God, fuck, Ilya..."

"Come here."

Ilya moves them up the bed, toward the headboard, Shane falling back into the pillows, Ilya kneeling over him. Shane scrambles his clothes off, tugging at Ilya's sweater, sweeping fingers over Ilya's hard cock in his pants. As soon as Ilya's clothes are off, Shane is leaning up off the bed by his elbows and covering Ilya's stomach with desperate kisses. Ilya sinks fingers into Shane's hair. It's not meant to be a directive, just a place on Shane's body to anchor himself to, but Ilya doesn't correct Shane when he shifts himself so his mouth lines up with Ilya's dick and he noses into it, lips open, like he wants it to just fall in.

Ilya watches Shane mouth around his cockhead, tongue pressed along the ridge, watches the trail of spit that follows when he pulls away, connecting their bodies. Ilya runs his thumb along Shane's eyebrows, like he's trying to smooth them out. His fingers graze Shane's eyelashes when Shane looks up at him, and for a moment, Ilya is overcome. It feels almost unbelievable that he can have this again.

"Shane," Ilya whispers. "You're so..." He doesn't know what he means to say. *Beautiful*, maybe. *Special*.

Shane doesn't make him say it. He swallows the length of Ilya's cock into his throat, pulling him in lazy strokes, moaning around him. His fingers dig into Ilya's thighs as he pushes himself up off the bed, to take more, to get Ilya deeper. Ilya curls his body over Shane's head, holding him in place, feeling almost out of his own body. He wants to be kissing Shane and fucking his mouth at the same time; he wants to be inside Shane and sucking his cock, too. He wants all of Shane, all at once. An entire night with Shane is a luxury Ilya has never been able to afford, and he still doesn't think it will be enough.

He pulls Shane back by the shoulders when he feels control slipping, with a whispered, "Stop, stop." Shane gazes up at him, as unfocused as Ilya feels, licking at his red lips. Ilya shakes his head.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ilya says against Shane's mouth, impossibly fond. "I need to fuck you right now."

"Yeah. Yes. Okay."

There is still a part of him in disbelief, even as he's running his hand along Shane's broad back and working him open with his fingers. Ilya had stopped pretending it didn't matter if Shane didn't want him anymore, long before he saw Shane with Rose Landry in that club. His body refused to play along anyway, the constant churn in his stomach evidence enough that it mattered, that losing Shane was maybe the only thing that mattered. But to be here, in Paris, Shane's body under his hands, his low voice moaning for Ilya's fingers, feels like the sort of dreams Ilya embarrasses himself by having, too wanting, too improbable. No one else here, in the city, in the country, who could discover them. Too perfect, the kind of perfect that makes Ilya want the impossible.

Maybe he could tell Shane more than he has, if he whispers it here, if it never leaves this bed. Maybe he could share all the worst parts of himself. Maybe tonight, they can pretend this is how it will always be.

Ilya lines himself up against Shane's hole, reaching up to squeeze fingers into his chest, dragging his teeth along the nape of Shane's neck. "Is it okay?"

"You don't have to ask me that, Ilya." Shane pushes up against him in emphasis. "I didn't forget."

"Mm, are you sure? Maybe you're too tight, now, without me. Maybe your body forgot how to take me."

“Fuck,” Shane says, reaching back behind him for something on Ilya’s body he can touch, landing on his hip. “Then you better remind me.”

It’s Ilya, though, that has seemed to forget, because he’s blown apart by how hot and tight Shane is, how he takes him in so well, like he’s made for it, made for Ilya’s pleasure. How mindless he gets, gone off the sensation of Ilya fucking into him, all the tension and self-control that normally clutches him like a vise gone, loose and open and free. Ilya finds himself holding Shane too tight, pressing kisses absently into his hair, the edge of his ear, the arch of his shoulder, and whispering dangerous truths along his skin, in Russian, a concession he allows himself only because he knows Shane can’t understand.

I love you, sweetheart. My beautiful Shane. Why can’t I have you forever? Why do I have to give you up?

“Oh my god, Ilya, fuck, please, please...”

Ilya rears back, flips Shane over to his back, because he wants to kiss him when he comes, wants to feel Shane’s release hit his stomach, wants the incontrovertible evidence on him. Shane’s arms go tightly around him, his legs anchoring him in place, and Ilya comes first, mouth bruising against Shane’s, and fucks him through it, pumps Shane’s dick with a rough hand until Ilya gets what he wants, Shane shuddering out his orgasm in thick streams splashing both of their chests.

Ilya lies with his head pressed up under Shane’s jaw, after. Shane’s fingers pull curls apart, ghosting along Ilya’s temple, his brow bone. It’s the kind of closeness that used to spur him out the door too quickly, the softness of Shane’s fingers, the way it reminds him of his mother’s tenderness. Now, he just turns into the warmth of Shane’s damp chest, his eyes shut, lets his lips rest against Shane’s clavicle, and tries not to think about anything beyond.

But Shane is always thinking beyond. Ilya, for all he tries, can only turn Shane’s brain off for so long.

“My flight is at eleven tomorrow,” Shane says quietly. “I probably have to leave at seven, or seven thirty, at the latest.”

Ilya braces for the next part: *You should probably get going. I need to get some sleep.* He’ll play it off, be understanding, maybe kiss Shane so hard in the doorway that he wishes, a little, that he didn’t ask Ilya to get lost. And then go back to his room, where he probably won’t sleep, just press his hand against the burn in his chest and think about Shane. Not so different from the last few months, after all.

Then Shane says: “Can you... would you stay? Until then?”

He sounds tentative, almost scared, his fingers stilling in Ilya’s hair. Like all of him is waiting for Ilya’s answer. Like he doesn’t already know it, from the way Ilya is wrapped around him, begging with his body not to be let go.

Nothing is ever obvious with you, Ilya.

Ilya raises up, spreads himself across Shane, trails the back of his fingers across the corner of Shane's lips. Trying to memorize the feel of them, maybe, saying *Would you stay?* in case he needs this memory, later, when Shane is gone again.

"Of course."

He climbs over Shane, kisses him. Lines their bodies up against each other, skin on skin on skin. Shane makes a grateful sound in his throat and opens his mouth for Ilya and Ilya can bask in it like he's always wanted to, try to stretch this night out as long as possible, as long as Shane will let him.

A day ago, all Ilya wanted was to get on the plane home. Now, he would give up anything for that not to happen. He doesn't know which version of him is right— the one that wanted to escape or the one that's desperate to stay— but he thinks they're probably both stupid for different reasons. But fuck, if only he didn't have to go. If neither of them had to. If they could just be here together like this, a million miles away from their real lives, where it doesn't feel impossible, not in the cradle of Shane's arms and the warm haven of his mouth, and this too-small bed in this unfamiliar city.

Reality will come, of course, sometime after Shane leaves for Montreal and Ilya has packed the pieces of himself back into his suitcase and returned to Boston. But tonight, at least, he can let himself have this.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, we're getting somewhere! As always, thanks for reading, hope you're enjoying it so far, please leave a comment if you are!

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](https://www.tumblr.com/scacao-blog). Come say hi to me over there!

Chapter 3: Sudden deliriums / And slow tremors

Chapter Summary

When they wake up, everything has changed.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from [The Drunken Boat by Arthur Rimbaud](#)

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

It's the ache Shane feels in his ass that wakes him instead of his alarm. It's just that it's been a while, a long time since he felt this residual burn that feels good in a strange way. Like Ilya is seared inside him, somehow, still lingering in the soreness. Shane is used to waking up in an empty bed, alone, feeling like this. Sometimes, it's enough to make him touch himself, first thing in the morning, trying to work up the ghost of what Ilya Rozanov did to him the night before.

But he's not alone, this time, and it's the first time he has ever been able to say that.

Shane quickly blinks his eyes open, wanting to take stock of the state of things, so he can remember this later, where he was when he woke up next to Ilya for the first time, where Ilya was in his bed, what Ilya looks like when he's asleep. Shane is on his side, and he can feel the edge of the bed behind him, far too small for two hockey players to comfortably fit. And Ilya is right there, just in front of him, his hair pressed flat by the pillow, mouth slightly open, and whatever cockiness or bravado he always seems to wear when awake is gone completely from his expression. They're the same age, but what Shane thinks, watching him sleep, is *he looks so young*.

It's hard to tell what time it is in the morning darkness. Shane was already prepared to spend the morning packing in the dark. He'll already be at the airport by the time the sun rises. The daylight seems hard to come by in Paris in the winter, starting too late and ending too early. He shouldn't delay just because it's still dark, he'll make himself late that way. But. But Ilya is still sleeping, and Shane set his alarm, anyway, and soon enough it will force them both into getting a move on with things. So it's okay, if he just stays here, not moving, breathing softly in case he's too loud and wakes Ilya up. It's okay if he just watches Ilya sleep a little longer.

But he must not have been quiet enough, or he must have moved too suddenly, too carelessly as he woke, because Ilya stirs and his eyes slide half-open, and when he sees Shane is awake

and watching him, his mouth tugs into a little smile.

“Good morning, Shane,” he says, voice gravelly and coarse, accent deeper, like he spent the night dreaming in Russian.

“Good morning, Ilya,” Shane says.

Ilya reaches a hand out to close around Shane’s jaw, shifts just enough to kiss him. It should be gross, Shane thinks, stale breath and dry mouths tugging at each other, but instead it makes him feel briefly overcome, and he has to shut his eyes tight against the sudden wetness threatening to spill over them. His body reacts, too, his heart thudding in his rib cage and his dick stirring against his thigh. Ilya’s hand lowers until it’s clutching loosely around Shane’s throat, thumb dragging down Shane’s Adam’s apple, and he’s already starting to shift closer to him, starting to draw Shane to his body almost automatically, still half-asleep but moving on sense memory alone, and—

And Shane’s alarm goes off.

Ilya groans theatrically against Shane’s mouth.

“Sorry,” Shane whispers, groping for his phone on the nightstand, killing the alarm and setting the phone back, face-down, like it’s an unwanted observer in the bedroom. “I have to...”

“I know.”

Ilya presses a final kiss against the corner of his lips, before sliding away from him, pulling himself up to sit back against the headboard. He puts his hands up behind his head, stretching his perfect obliques, maybe showing off a little to see Shane’s reaction. Or maybe that’s just Shane’s imagination. Either way, Shane is a little embarrassed at how hard he is when he crawls out of bed and has to walk across the room to the dresser where his boxer briefs are. He can feel Ilya’s eyes on him the entire time.

“Mm, are you sure you do not have time?” Ilya says. “We can be very fast.”

“No,” Shane says, but hesitates. Ilya has made him come in under thirty seconds plenty of times. Maybe they can just... he *did* just put his underwear back on. He still needs to pack. He really shouldn’t.

Fuck.

“Let me check the time,” Shane says, and Ilya grins so wide that it makes him reflexively say, “Shut up.”

Shane goes to grab his phone again, sitting down on the edge of the bed, reaching over to turn the bedside lamp on. Ilya is on him immediately, mouth warm on his neck from behind, between his shoulder blades, and Shane moans into it without even meaning to.

He turns on the screen and immediately it is flooded with notifications. He sees about a million messages; from his mom, from his *agent*, holy shit. There’s stuff in the group chat,

there's a few from Hayden.

"What the fuck?" he breathes.

Ilya presses a kiss to his shoulder and peers over it. "What's wrong?"

"Uh, I don't know," Shane says, already feeling panic rising in his throat, already imagining his mom saying something like, *There was an accident, Dad is in the hospital, or You're being traded* or somehow something even worse, like *Everyone knows you're fucking Ilya Rozanov, it's all over the internet*. He stands up, too quickly, from the bed, looks sideways at Ilya as he scrolls to one of his mom's many missed calls and presses down.

"I just have to call my mom really quick," he says to Ilya, phone to his ear already, trying to sound like he is a lot calmer than he feels.

Ilya makes a broad gesture that Shane takes to mean *Should I go?* And Shane shakes his head quickly, although depending on the news, it might be better if Shane is alone to react badly. He focuses on his breathing as he waits for the call to connect. Fuck, it's late over there, probably one AM. That isn't good. That can't mean anything good.

"Hello? Shane?" his mom says into the phone. Shane tries to listen for anything alarming in her voice. It doesn't sound like she's been crying, at least, he thinks. He can't be entirely sure. She'd probably be crying if something had happened to Dad. Would she be crying if she'd found out that her son was gay and secretly fucking his professional rival?

"Hi Mom," Shane says. It comes out clipped, awkward. A poor performance of casualness. "I'm just packing for the airport. Everything okay?"

Behind him, Ilya has shuffled off the bed and started pulling his clothes back on, the vague suggestion of getting off one more time for the road put to rest seemingly for good. He fishes his phone out of his pants pocket and scrolls through it, but he's still enough that Shane thinks he might be listening to their conversation, too.

"Oh, honey, you didn't see? You haven't heard the news?"

Oh no. Oh god. It's the sex thing. Or he's been traded. Or something worse that Shane has not even been able to imagine so far.

"What news?" he says, forcing the words out. He sits down on the edge of the bed, thinking it'll be better if he's got something solid under him for whatever he hears next.

Ilya comes to sit beside him, phone still in his hand, TV remote in the other. Shane watches him turn on the TV with more than a little alarm. What the fuck could have happened that is bad enough to reach French news?

"Okay, honey, just breathe," Mom says. "First of all, we will get this sorted out. So don't worry. I'm sure things will be back to normal soon."

"Jesus Christ Mom, can you just tell me what's going on?"

Ilya flips a couple of channels until he finds a news station. The screen is taken up by swooping, skyward footage of a volcano, an enormous grey cloud erupting dramatically outward in all directions. This appears to be what Ilya means to watch, because he places the remote down on the bed and stares at the picture. The chiron below displays what Shane thinks must be the location of the volcano, which he can't possibly pronounce.

Eyjafjallajökull, Iceland.

What the *fuck*?

"Shane, calm down," his mom says, in her manager voice, giving directions rather than assurance. "There was a volcano that erupted overnight in Iceland, and there's a huge ash cloud spreading over Europe now. They've closed European airspace for the time being, until the cloud dissipates."

"Oh," Shane says.

Closed airspace. All of it? *All* of it? France included? How long does it take a cloud of ash to dissipate?

Shane looks at Ilya, who is thumbing around on his phone, occasionally glancing up at the panoramic shots of the giant grey cloud taking up the TV screen. He's decidedly not looking at Shane, and Shane realizes this is Ilya's way of giving them privacy, while still being in the same room. It's weirdly intimate, actually, to have a phone call with his mom with his— whatever Ilya is— right here, too. Shane is noticing that, for the first time.

"Okay? Shane?" Mom is saying, "it'll be fine. I'm sure you'll be able to come home in a day or two. This is just temporary."

"Temporary, yeah," Shane says, and for whatever reason that word makes Ilya look up at him. "Okay."

"Okay. Do you need me to book a hotel for you?"

"No, Mom, it's okay. I can handle it. Sorry to call you so late. You should get some sleep."

"Okay," Mom says, sounding unconvinced. "You're sure?"

"Yeah... yeah. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay. Please keep me updated. Love you, honey."

"Love you too," Shane says, and hangs up.

Phone in his hands, he opens up his email, scrolls through what feels like a hundred emails to find what he's looking for: *Message Important d'Air France*. He skims the email, a businessy, politely apologetic rehash of what his mom said over the phone. *Due to the unfolding nature of the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland, we have been unfortunately required to cancel your upcoming flight to Montréal-Trudeau International Airport. Weather conditions have...* Shane stops reading after "cancel".

“Fuck,” Shane says. He holds his phone out to Ilya, shows him the message. Ilya laughs. “Yours, too?”

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“*Fuck.*”

Shane stands up from the bed, walks to the window, where the very beginning of grey light has started to spread across the sky. It must be after eight. Not that it matters now, nothing to rush to pack for. Because they are stuck in Paris. Because there are zero flights out of France. Because the *entire European airspace is closed*.

“I gotta call my coach...”

“Is middle of the night at home, Shane,” Ilya says. “You can call later.”

Shane needs to do *something*, though. He needs to, like, learn about volcanic eruptions, and how long they usually last. Is the volcano still erupting? Shane thinks about plucking the remote away from its position on the bed between Ilya’s legs, turning up the volume. He wonders if Ilya put it there on purpose to fuck with Shane, or tempt him, or whatever. Instead, he reads the cancellation email from Air France two more times, but there’s no information there he doesn’t already know. Air France doesn’t know when this will be over, either. Maybe no one on earth does.

“Ilya, what are we gonna do?” Shane says.

Ilya finishes whatever he has been doing on his phone, and tosses it gently to the bed beside him. He crosses the room to Shane, stands in front of him, squeezes into his shoulders with his big hands, rubbing them like he means to warm them up.

“Looks like we will have a little vacation,” he says, with a big obnoxious grin.

Shane wants to be annoyed and not as charmed by this as he is. “Don’t start.”

Ilya’s hands squeeze him again. “What? I did not do this. Is an act of god.” He takes a step forward, closer into Shane’s space. “Maybe He just wants us to fuck in Paris a little more.”

His hand goes to Shane’s jaw, turns it, and Shane makes a little noise in the back of his throat, and lets Ilya suck the skin on his neck, because what the fuck else is he going to do? Ilya’s right, they’re stuck here, for god knows how long, and they still have the hotel for...

“Oh shit.” Shane is immediately brought back to himself. He pushes into Ilya, who pulls off from his neck with a little dismay. “Where are we going to stay? This reservation isn’t even under my name. Do you think I need to make a new one?” Shane is already pulling out his phone, meaning to find the hotel confirmation email he’s sure he was sent months ago by the travel coordinator. Another worrying thought occurs to him. “Do you think they’re all booked up?”

“Shane.” Ilya still has his hands on Shane’s shoulders, and he squeezes, lowers his hands to Shane’s biceps, squeezes again. Harder, until Shane looks up at him instead of his screen.

“Relax. Is taken care of.”

“What?”

Ilya shrugs. “I took care of it. When you were talking to your mom.”

Shane feels immediate relief. Not that they would have been on the street, surely not, but still. It’s taken care of. Ilya took care of it. “You extended the reservation?”

“Ah, no. I am not staying in this terrible hotel anymore,” Ilya says, smiling. He bends forward to kiss Shane. Then slides his hands off Shane’s arms, walks back to the bed to retrieve his phone, pulling something up on the screen. “I got Airbnb for us.”

For a moment, Shane doesn’t understand. Then, he does, all the myriad implications.

A single Airbnb. One. For *us*. One place. For the two of them. Just them. Under Ilya’s name. Ilya Rozanov. Shane Hollander. Alone together. The kind of thing that, like, married couples do on their honeymoon. And here they are, two hockey players. Who are supposed to publicly hate each other. Renting an Airbnb in fucking *Paris*.

“An Airbnb?” Shane says, like maybe he heard it wrong and can make it sound better on a second try.

Ilya is coming back now with his phone, looking happy, reading enthusiastically off the screen. “Yes! Is very nice! In nice part of Paris. In the 16th...” He squints at the screen. “*Arr?* What the fuck is *Arr?*”

“*Arrondissement*,” Shane mutters.

“Yes, okay. That.” Ilya’s smile flattens out. Ilya always seems annoyed when he’s reminded that Shane speaks French. “Anyway, look at it.”

He passes his phone casually to Shane, like this is something they do all the time. Like Ilya’s phone is not one of his many secrets that Shane has wanted to know for ages, has surreptitiously glanced at a million times, whenever a Cyrillic or decidedly feminine name pops up on the screen while they’re around each other. The listing of the Airbnb that Ilya reserved— for *just the two of them*— is pulled up, a carousel of very attractively posed photos set above a flowery description:

Accessible only via private elevator, this spacious, one-of-a-kind apartment offers a luxurious and peaceful experience in the heart of Paris.

The apartment opens to a beautiful level terrace, meticulously furnished, offering a bright and quiet harbor in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the city. Take advantage of this exceptional setting to relax, have coffee or organize alfresco meals.

Inside, you will find two elegantly decorated suites, each with its own bathroom, offering privacy and comfort to your guests.

Shane swipes through a few of the photos, which show a big, open interior, a sort of mix of new and old decoration, though Shane doesn't linger on those details in favor of more pressing concerns: two big bedrooms, two nice-sized bathrooms— with normal looking toilets and showers, thank god. There is a shot of the private entrance. And one of an elegantly arranged table setting on the outdoor terrace, with a direct view of the Eiffel Tower between the blue-grey zinc roofs of picturesque Haussmannian apartments. It's the kind of photograph you'd see on a postcard, or a cafe wall in Old Montreal that is trying to evoke a little nostalgia.

It does look incredibly nice. Looking at the photos, it feels like Shane's seeing more of Paris in them than he has in the last several days combined. He's just trying to decide if what it looks like, most of all, is *romantic*. Suspiciously so.

Ilya's hands are back up on Shane's shoulders, thumbs rubbing circles into the junction of Shane's neck, close to where he was sucking into a few minutes before. He stands with his hips pushed into the space between them.

"See? Is fine, Shane. Very big, very spacious. Many bedrooms. Private entrance, no neighbors." He says this like he knows exactly what would worry Shane about this place. Well, he would, wouldn't he? It's not like Ilya doesn't have to worry about the exact same things. "Will not be suspicious."

"Of course it's suspicious," Shane says, handing Ilya back his phone. "It's going to be suspicious anywhere we stay together."

"Or maybe, it will be a good story?" Ilya says brightly, his blue eyes searching Shane's. "We will say, oh, all the other places were taken up. So many people are stranded in Paris, so no rooms are left, so we had to book a place together. Rozanov and Hollander, forced to live under one roof, yes? Maybe they will want to ask how we managed to do it without killing each other."

Shane nods absently. Would that work? Would anyone buy it? Honestly, maybe they would. It's not bad, the cover story, because it's not even a cover story. Rather, it's the kind of thing that Shane has wished for more than he cares for anyone to know: an act of god, like Ilya said, forcing them together in a socially acceptable way, a way that no one can scrutinize them for. He used to wish for an All Star Game that had them on the same team, but this is just as good, maybe even better.

Maybe it might allow them to change the narrative a little.

We became friends, after we were stuck in Paris, after the volcano, he might say to a reporter someday. Sure, we used to hate each other, but then we learned how to get along. The volcano changed everything.

"Okay," Shane says. "Okay. Yeah. This could be good. Great, even."

"Mm." Ilya's hands feel so good, pressing into his muscles like this, sliding over his skin. Enough so that Shane almost misses the next thing Ilya says: "And I reserved for two weeks, so we don't have to worry."

“Two... two *weeks*?”

“Just in case!”

“Ilya, we can’t stay for two *weeks*,” Shane says, voice cracking over the last bit.

“Well, it’s not up to *me*, Shane,” Ilya says, shoulders hunching defensively. “Entire continent is closed to air traffic for now.”

Shane takes in a big breath. Lets it out slowly. Tries to turn the volume down in his mind, the way the words *two weeks* are ringing in it.

“Yeah,” he says, relaxing a little under Ilya’s hands. “Yeah. Sorry, yeah. I know. I’m just...”

“Yes, worried about missing games. Your first game is Tuesday, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Same. It will probably be all over by then.” Ilya’s mouth quirks downward for a moment, before he seems to shake it off. “We still have weekend, so. Don’t worry. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

Ilya kisses him softly, no heat, gently holding Shane by the shoulders. Shane drifts into him, fingers knotting in the soft fabric of Ilya’s sweater. He thinks, absently, of the fact that all this happened before either of them had a chance to brush their teeth, thinks he should be grossed out by the kiss. But he finds he isn’t, finds he doesn’t care. Finds that he likes the way Ilya tastes all the time, it turns out. First thing in the morning and last thing at night.

They have this for longer than just today. They have this every morning, and every night, until the volcano decides otherwise. They have a private elevator and a big two-bedroom apartment and a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower, at least for the weekend. At least for a little while.

Shane lets Ilya turn the kiss into something a little more, swoons into it, actually, matching Ilya’s speed when he starts grinding into Shane’s crotch with his thigh and licking into his mouth for real. Ilya grips Shane’s jaw, his other hand slipping down to palm over Shane’s chest, sinking fingers into his pectoral muscle, thumbing over his nipple.

Shane lasts thirty seconds under Ilya’s hands and mouth before he’s dropping to his knees in front of him and working Ilya’s dick out of his pants. Ilya laughs, panting and curling hands into Shane’s hair, leaning back into the wall beside the narrow window so he can jut his hips out for Shane. Shane looks up so he can watch Ilya watch him slip the fat head of Ilya’s cock past his lips. The late sunrise is casting through the window in earnest now, leaving Ilya only half in dim lamplight; the rest of him is softly golden. His curls look individually backlit, his eyes glowing, so blue that it’s almost hard for Shane to look into them.

Shane can’t believe he gets to have this, have him. And for longer than a single night. He’d never thought he could. He wonders if maybe he wished this volcano into being, subconsciously. He wonders if maybe he’s going to wake up any second now.

“Shane, fuck, you are so good.”

Ilya steers Shane around by the hair, even though it makes his technique sloppier. Maybe that’s why Ilya likes to do it. Shane drools around the base of Ilya’s cock, letting his mouth fill with spit, letting it bead up and glisten on Ilya’s dirty-blond pubic hair when it dribbles past his lips. Ilya’s cock, first thing in the morning. Before the sun is even fully out. It’s probably going to be worse for him, down the line, that he knows what it’s like to have this now. When they have to go back to normal.

But he can enjoy it while it’s here.

“Ah, Hollander, fuck, *Shane*...”

Shane works a rhythm, in and out, pursing his lips over his teeth so everything just feels hot, and soft, and smooth for Ilya, so Ilya can thrust back into Shane’s mouth when Shane pulls back, fill it with his dick, glide over his tongue and press up against the roof of Shane’s mouth. It’s always almost on the edge of *too much*, and that’s probably what Shane loves so much about sucking Ilya’s dick: how much concentration it takes, how he can’t think about anything else while he’s doing it, how he’s rewarded for something hard at the end of it all.

And Shane’s reward comes pretty fast this morning. Shane’s name in Ilya’s mouth becomes a groan, or a growl, and Ilya hastily grabs for his dick and pulls Shane off of it with the hand curled into his hair, until just his cockhead is balanced on Shane’s outstretched tongue. Ilya jerks himself roughly, hand gripped tight on the glistening base of his cock, and then comes into Shane’s open mouth, splashing hot across his tongue and chin. Shane doesn’t close his mouth to swallow. He waits until Ilya’s finished, eyes focused again, so Shane can show him the cum balanced on his tongue. Ilya’s gaze is soft as he strokes his thumb across Shane’s chin, wiping it clean.

“So good, Shane. Swallow it. Clean me off.”

Shane dutifully swallows, sucks Ilya’s thumb into his mouth, swirls his tongue around it. Licks away the tiny bead of cum still poised at the tip of Ilya’s cock. Presses a grateful kiss to Ilya’s thigh. By then, Ilya is reaching for him, pulling him to stand. He kisses Shane hard, filling his mouth again, before pushing him back toward the bed.

“Turn around,” Ilya says.

Shane has some idea of what Ilya means to do, is already spreading his legs a little wider as he turns and puts his hands flat out on the bedspread. Ilya gropes him into place, sliding his hands down Shane’s arms and squeezing as he places them where he wants them to be, pulling Shane’s hips back, until Shane is positioned almost in a plank on the bed with his legs over the side, feet on the floor, like the way he stands when he’s totally winded and leaning over the boards for support. He’s probably going to think of *this* now, the next time it happens on the ice.

Ilya’s hot breath is on Shane’s back as he kisses a line down his spine. Fingers curl into the waistband of Shane’s boxer briefs, and then they’re tugged down, pooling around his ankles, Shane’s hard cock bouncing up to his stomach as soon as it’s free. Ilya’s broad hand cups

Shane's ass, then rears back and slaps it. Shane moans into the sting on his skin even before Ilya's mouth is there, kissing it better.

"Ilya..." Shane says, which is either a warning, or a request for more, he isn't sure himself.

Ilya laughs as he kneels behind Shane. He spreads Shane's ass open without preamble and then his tongue is pressing against Shane's hole, licking a wet stripe up and down, pushing into the resistance Shane's body automatically offers. Shane moans and drops his head below his shoulders. He tries to relax just for Ilya's tongue, his hot mouth, loosen the tightness in his hole enough for Ilya to lick inside him, open him up, and he's rewarded with the feeling of Ilya breeching him, the wet slide of him coming inside, the warmth of his lips pressed against Shane's quivering skin.

Ilya's hand wraps around Shane's dick and squeezes it, and fat drops of precome dribble out of the head. It's too good, when Ilya is inside him and around him like this, too close to what Shane wants most, which is to be completely wrapped up, overwhelmed by Ilya, to somehow have Ilya touch all of him at once. It gets him too worked up, too turned on to do much more than moan Ilya's name and try to draw it out for a few more seconds, another minute. Ilya starts to pump Shane in the rhythm that he's using to fuck him with his tongue and Shane can barely breathe out an, "Oh god, *Ilya*—" and then he's coming hard, flooding over Ilya's hand and the bed, his head collapsing forward onto his tensed forearms, vision briefly going white.

Shane comes back to himself with Ilya straightening up, laughing against the damp skin between Shane's shoulder blades, pressing a kiss there, and groping Shane's heaving chest.

"Mm," Shane mumbles, face down in the bedspread. He feels a telltale pressure against his thigh as Ilya curls around him. "You're hard again."

"Yes," Ilya says. Shane can hear the smile around the word. "But probably there isn't time right now for more."

There isn't time. That's always the case, isn't it? They can never get as much of this, of each other, as they want. Shane is halfway down this morose train of thought when he realizes what Ilya actually means: it's probably nearly nine AM, they both need to pack, they both need to shower, so that they can check out of this hotel, and then... and then go to the Airbnb that *Ilya booked for just the two of them*. Where they will have all the time in the world. Suddenly, Shane is strangely excited at the thought of not having time for another round, not here at least. He wants, in fact, to get the fuck out of this hotel as soon as possible. He turns around, collapses on the mattress. It's okay if the sheets at his back are sticky and congealing, he's going to shower right away, anyway.

Ilya runs his fingers along Shane's cheek, kneeling over him.

"I will go back to my room and shower?" Ilya says, with the inflection of a question, like he's maybe suggesting that Shane insist on showering together, instead. "And then pack. And then, what?"

"We can meet downstairs," Shane says. "At ten? I don't even know what time it is." He laughs. It's so small and huge at the same time, so mundane and incredible, to be with Ilya in

the morning and lose track of the time.

“Mm. Okay. Yes.” Ilya kisses Shane again, then heaves himself off the bed.

He arranges himself back into his pants, wipes a hand over his sweater, like he’s checking for evidence on it. Toes back into his sneakers, checks his pocket to make sure his phone is still there. Shane watches him from the bed, still a little soggy and weak from the orgasm Ilya gave him. They’ve never really rushed to see each other off at the door, anyway. And there’s no reason to, when they’re going to see each other again in barely an hour. It would be so needy of him that Ilya would laugh. Shane tells himself all of these things to keep himself on the bed.

Ilya grins at Shane one more time, hand on the door, and then he’s gone.

Shane doesn’t allow himself much more time to bask in the afterglow, there’s too much to do. He peels himself off of the sheets to shower, brush his teeth, drag styling creme through his hair so it does something more than just fall directly into his face. Here is where he first remembers: holy shit, he’s staying in an Airbnb with Ilya for god knows how long.

He remembers again, packing his clothes. He’s almost out of clean ones, since he thought he’d be in Europe for not even a week, and now... oh yeah. Holy shit. He’ll have to find a cleaning service. Ilya probably needs clean clothes, too. He remembers again, thinking about their clothes mixing together in the bag and being cleaned together and then folded together and... holy shit.

By the time Shane’s packed and has swept the room for stuff he may have forgotten and nonsensically made the bed– which he probably shouldn’t have done because they will definitely need to strip the sheets, but oh well– his chest is tight and knotted with anticipation and trepidation and a tiny bit of outright fear. He still quite can’t believe this is happening, any of it, least of all the volcano that is still erupting on the TV. The reporters are talking about it, how it’s a historic event, how the airspace over Europe hasn’t been closed like this since World War Two, how tens of thousands of flights have already been cancelled and there’s no telling how many more are to come. It feels appropriately historic to Shane, too, like he’s living through something monumental– waking up to Ilya, kissing Ilya first thing in the morning, living with Ilya somewhere. Fuck, living together, for real, that is what they are about to do. Shane’s going to be with Ilya all the time. They can relax and watch TV and eat and work out together and fuck each other senseless ten times a day if they want to, and. And.

And just *be together*. Just be.

It’s probably okay to be scared, a little. Or a lot. It’s probably okay for Shane to worry if he will be able to survive this, later. It doesn’t mean he isn’t going to do it, that he isn’t excited to do it, that he isn’t putting his shit away in his bag far more haphazardly than normal in his haste to meet Ilya downstairs. It just means that Shane can feel both of those things, equally, at the same time. Scared and excited. Nervous and happy. Worried, and overjoyed.

History is being made, after all.

Shane turns the TV off just before he leaves the room, pushing his bag out of the door, five minutes to ten.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading so far! Comments are always loved/appreciated/fawned over/screenshotted and kept for emotional support <3

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](#). Come say hi to me over there!

Chapter 4: Paris with all its smoke

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya get situated in Paris.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Title is from 'How I love the first shiver of winter' by Alfred de Musset.

I am reasonably sure there is a Rue D'Artagnan in Paris somewhere, but I made all of these names and locations up. And the Airbnb is an amalgamation of like four really nice apartments I found all mixed together.

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

Ilya stands with Shane at the corner of *Rue DuBois* and *Rue D'Artagnan*, two names he has no idea how to pronounce, but knows he said them wrong by Shane's stupid smile when he tried. Shane is strangely at his most adorable when he's mean.

In front of them is what Ilya believes is the Airbnb, though there is a certain coyness to the tiny building numbers and sign posts in Paris, like knowing exactly where you are in the city is a secret the French would rather keep to themselves.

The building is grandiose and ornate in the way Ilya is starting to recognize as quintessentially Parisian, intricate stone cornices, terraces lined by delicate wrought iron, narrow metal shutters on all the windows, a certain uniform shape to the roofs that Ilya suspects Shane knows the actual French architectural name for, so he definitely doesn't plan to ask. The main door is shielded behind an enormous iron gate, itself appropriately as ornate as it is uninviting.

"I need to call the host," Ilya says, pulling out his phone, glad he paid thirty euros for an international plan back when he landed in Berlin. "She said she will meet us to give the keys."

Ilya was waiting to say this to Shane until they were already here, because he's afraid of how it will land. Or rather, he fears he knows exactly how it will land—Shane will freak out that someone knows they are here *together*. Even when there might be a perfectly normal explanation, Shane seems always convinced that the two of them alone in public together is inherently too suspicious to reconcile. Or maybe he's right, and Ilya just can't be bothered to care anymore.

He watches Shane now, for his reaction, but Shane seems surprisingly unfazed. Just in case, Ilya adds, “Would you rather wait for me somewhere, until I am done?”

“No,” Shane says quickly, to Ilya’s surprise. “It’s okay. Unless you, uh, want me to.”

“No, I do not want you to.”

Ilya can’t keep the smile off his face as he fishes the host’s number out of his email and presses the phone to his ear. Everything about the day so far has been almost too incredible for Ilya to dwell on for too long, lest the glut of happiness in his chest overtake him. Waking up in bed with Shane, eyes so soft on Ilya, his little smile and his scattered freckles the very first thing in Ilya’s vision, that alone had stopped Ilya’s heart for a moment. He had thought, *this is enough, I can take this back to Boston, I can live on just this until next time*. And then, the news on his phone— a fucking volcano on the other side of the continent, spewing ash over the Atlantic Ocean, discovering that actually, they were not leaving Europe at all... Ilya had turned on the television in Shane’s hotel room with the sort of awe and fear he used to feel when he snuck back into the house as a teenager, sure that any moment the other shoe would drop, his father’s voice in the kitchen sarcastically calling out, *Welcome back, Ilyushka*, or a reporter on the news clarifying that *The eruption is over and flights are proceeding as scheduled*.

But it hadn’t happened. And maybe it had taken Ilya until they were in the Uber, heading to this palatial-for-Paris apartment— that had cost him twelve grand to rent for two weeks but could have cost thirty grand for all he cared— for it to really sink in, that this wasn’t a dream or a very elaborate hallucination, but that he was actually staying with Shane in a foreign country with no expiration date at all, but the realization did eventually come.

And now Ilya fears he might never be quite as happy as he is right now, standing on this street corner and waiting for the call to connect, and watching the back of Shane’s head as he looks around them.

“*Bonjour!* Yes, this is Marie?”

“Ah, hello,” Ilya says, and irrationally thinks of handing the phone over to Shane, even though the woman has already switched to English. He tightens his grip instead. “This is Ilya Rozanov. We are standing outside of 11 Rue Du...Bois?”

Marie apparently understands his approximation of whatever that word is, or she has been expecting the call anyway, because she answers, “Ah, of course, *Monsieur Rozanov!* Welcome! Yes, we are expecting you, *mais* ah, it is a little early for check-in.” She tuts. “We thought maybe you would be here later, instead.”

He imagines the look on Shane’s face if he heard someone call Ilya *Monsieur Rozanov*. He would be completely delighted. Might even bring it up in bed. Ilya can’t decide if that is a good thing or not.

“Ah, yes, we checked out of our other hotel already, so...”

Marie blows out a breath. “Ah, okay, I see. Okay, well, it is no problem. The apartment is all ready for you, so you will be able to go in right away. I will come meet you at the place very soon, and give you the keys, yes?”

“Great,” Ilya says. Shane looks to him, and Ilya gives him what is meant to be an encouraging wag of his eyebrows.

“*D’accord*. Okay. I will be there in, ah, thirty minutes, maybe? There is a nice— ah— *viennoiserie* nearby, called *Le Victor Hugo*, do you know who Victor Hugo is?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, which he thinks he does, but is now a little uncertain. It’s Paris, he is probably a writer, or a poet, or an artist. And does it really matter?

“Okay, good,” Marie says happily, like it really does. “Okay. Go there, it is just down *Rue D’Artagnan*, have a breakfast maybe, *un p’tit café*, yes? I will call you when I am there.”

Ilya has the sense that he is being politely bossed around, but says, “Okay,” and the call cuts.

Shane is a bit down the street, taking photos with his phone. Ilya briefly can’t contain the sheer happiness that he feels, watching him do it. Like they’re on vacation together. Like all of this has not been a miraculous accident, but somehow intentional.

“Everything good?” Shane says, when Ilya approaches, his suitcase trailing behind.

“Yes, she is on her way.” Ilya puts his head on Shane’s shoulder to look at his phone. Shane straightens, but doesn’t flinch away, maybe because the street is currently deserted. Another small miracle. “We should take one together.”

“Oh,” Shane says, like he hadn’t thought of it. “Yeah, sure.”

They stand together on the corner, close enough to fit in the frame, not so close that the photo might be used as evidence in a trial. Ilya puts his head against Shane’s, smiling wide, their hair blending slightly together, black and gold. Shane fiddles with the angle so that the pretty building and not-so-pretty winter sky are both in view behind them, long enough that Ilya says, “Hollander...” and Shane says, “Ugh, fine...” and then takes four shots in quick succession, smiling all the way up to his eyes. On the last photo, Ilya kisses him on the cheek. He’s sure Shane won’t allow it, will immediately delete the picture, but Shane instead scrolls through the pictures a few times, appraising the angle or the lighting or something, before pocketing his phone, apparently satisfied.

“Are you hungry?” Ilya says. “Or was breakfast at the hotel enough for you?”

He grins suggestively enough that Shane immediately understands. “Fuck off.”

But Ilya grins wider, remembering it, Shane with Ilya’s cum all over his mouth and chin, lapping it up from Ilya’s fingers. So fucking hot, so beautiful, probably the two primary descriptions Ilya has for Shane all the time. Shane is the most unconsciously and innately lewd person Ilya has probably ever met. He hopes Shane never realizes exactly how much, so that Ilya can keep tenderly exploiting it forever.

“They said it will be a while. We are early for check in, so they are being nice to us. Let’s go.”

Le Victor Hugo is, as their host said, just down the street, another picturesque shop like so many Ilya has already seen, rows of bistro chairs and crowded little tables out front. The interior smells absolutely unbelievable, some incredible mix of butter and bread and sugar, making Ilya’s mouth immediately water. He peers into the glass case lining the wall, at the spread of different pastries and breads, and points at the ones he wants so Shane can order them for him.

“This one, with the chocolate. This one, too. Oh, this one looks so good. What is *pêche*?”

“Peach.”

“*Fuck*. That one, too. What will you have, Shane?” Shane is peering at a premade salad with salmon on it, that lies huddled off in a corner of the case, meant to be forgotten among the golden, flaky baked goods. “Hollander. No. Please, you will not eat sad salad. I will have to pretend I don’t even know you.”

“You should be eating healthy too, asshole.”

“I am on vacation, Shane.”

A staff member on the other side of the case, decked out in a very serious white coat, approaches them, asks something brusque in French. Shane responds, starts pointing at the things behind the glass that Ilya asked for. It’s an interesting feeling, watching Shane casually order for him, like this might happen all the time, instead of an almost unbelievable circumstance. It feels a little like Ilya’s been transported to a different world. And maybe he has, this is so far out of the ordinary for them. Ilya has a brief desire to throw his arms around Shane, which dissipates as soon as he sees the staffer bag up three pastries and the salad and begin moving to the registers.

“Ah, wait. You forgot the one with the peaches.”

Shane shakes his head. “Don’t you think three is enough?”

“No.”

Shane sighs at the comical pout on Ilya’s face, but calls the staffer back, points to the glistening, flaky *tarte aux pêches*, and Ilya smiles wide.

It’s cold on the street, the sun hidden behind clouds, as they go to one of the available bistro tables, Shane holding his salad and peering at Ilya as he sticks his face into the bag of pastries and moans theatrically.

“Shane, you have to smell this, oh my god.”

“No thanks,” Shane says.

“You are going to get small, if you don’t eat enough. You will lose all of your sexy muscles.” Ilya slides his hand to Shane’s side and pinches him. Shane goes immediately red and casts his eyes around them, panicked. Ilya can never tell him this, but it’s his reactions that will give him away, if something ever does.

“Rozanov!” he hisses.

And it probably is stupid, and dangerous, but Ilya did it because he has a theory that he wants to test. And just as he thought, no one looks at them even once on the street. There are people everywhere, and if this was Boston, Ilya would have probably been stopped for a picture by now. But no one recognizes them here. The guy packing up their order didn’t spare them a second glance. Marie on the phone had absolutely no reaction to the name *Ilya Rozanov*, either.

The two of them live in a hockey bubble, Ilya has always known this. In Moscow, where hockey enjoys national stature, he gets recognized; when they are traveling, the hotels they stay at are by the hockey rinks where they play, and they get recognized there, too, in the little vicinity around the stadiums, even in the non-hockey towns.

But here, so far, they are astonishingly anonymous. They could be anyone. But what they are not, particularly, are *Ilya Rozanov* and *Shane Hollander*. Those names don’t have any meaning in Paris. People are more concerned with whether Ilya recognizes Victor Hugo, not the other way around.

Ilya thinks he could, maybe, do anything here with Shane and no one would care at all.

They sit down. Shane plucks salmon from the top of his salad with a fork and chews on it slowly and thoughtfully, while Ilya tears into one of the flaky croissants and thinks this is probably what food tastes like in Heaven.

“Do you know Victor Hugo?” Ilya says absently, wondering whether he himself does.

“Uh, yeah. He wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, right?”

Ilya nods thoughtfully. “Ah. Yes, I’ve heard of this. Is real place, Notre Dame?”

Shane looks at him like he’s said something obvious and stupid. “Yes, it’s a real place, Ilya.”

Ilya finishes the first croissant, licks the butter off his fingers, sucks one into his mouth when Shane makes a grossed-out face. “Sorry, *Shane*, I do not know everything on Earth. More than *you*—”

“--Sure,” Shane says, rolling his eyes.

“-- but still not everything, okay?”

Shane is thoughtful for a moment. “It’s here in Paris. Notre Dame. Do you want to see it?”

Ilya shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe. I have my own hunchback here,” Ilya says, kicking Shane under the table.

Shane laughs, kicking Ilya back. “Fuck off!”

Ilya pulls out his next treasure, a crunchy rectangle with thick dollops of chocolate inside. His first bite takes out almost a quarter of it, leaving an imprint like a shark, or a cartoon, a perfect half-moon missing from one corner.

“Fuck, this is so good,” he says around his mouthful. “Hollander. It is so good. You have to try it. Here.”

He holds out the remainder out in front of Shane, who gives him a look like he knows Ilya is annoying him on purpose. And that is part of it, of course, because Ilya can’t help himself. But also, it really is fucking delicious, and Ilya wants Shane to experience at least a little bit of happiness before he returns to his dismal health food.

Shane sighs like he’s making a great sacrifice, says, “Fine,” and takes the *pain au chocolat* out of Ilya’s hand. He takes a bite out of one of the remaining corners.

“Yes? It’s good?”

“Yeah,” Shane says. He takes another bite, less politely. “Fuck, it’s really good.”

Ilya is maybe a little too happy. “See? And we are not at home, so it does not count against your diet.”

“Yeah, right,” Shane says.

Something about that makes them both go quiet. The *not at home* part, or the *doesn’t count* part. There’s something about all of this, the tiny, ordinary joy between them at this cramped little table, that maybe doesn’t count, either.

Ilya devours his remaining pastries and gets Shane to try the one with sliced peaches on it, a small victory, and then Marie calls him back and says she’s waiting for them outside of the front gate. They make their way back to the building, trailing their luggage, Ilya licking the butter off his lips and wiping the crumbs from his coat.

Marie is a blond, middle-aged woman dressed in smart winter gear, who politely waves to them as they approach.

“*Bonjour*, hello! Welcome, *Monsieur Rozanov* and...?”

It’s immediately apparent to Ilya that she has no idea who either of them are, maybe has never heard of hockey at all. There is no recognition in her eyes or demeanor that they are even remotely famous, let alone famously not friendly with one another. Shane sticks out his hand for her to shake.

“Shane.”

“Okay! This way, please.”

She pulls out a key to unlock the huge iron front gate, then hands it to Ilya. Behind the gate is, unexpectedly, an interior courtyard. Marie leads them through it to a side elevator, decidedly not very fancy. This, too, requires a key, which she uses and then hands to Ilya as well. Ilya wonders if maybe their next stop should be a store to buy a keychain. They are not even fully inside the building and he's now holding more keys than he feels he should be responsible for.

Shane says something to Marie in French and she is immediately delighted to have someone to speak to normally. They chat as they wait for the elevator to come, a crawl from the tenth floor. Ilya can only tell what they're talking about to the extent that he recognizes when Marie asks Shane a question he hasn't figured out a lie for, maybe "What are you two in Paris for?" because he stutters and presses his mouth flat the same way in French and English, before replying with something even Ilya can tell is unconvincing. He's really the worst liar Ilya has ever known.

The trip back up in the elevator is just as slow, and Ilya spends it standing rather awkwardly behind Shane's shoulder as he fields polite questions from their host. They disembark and the entrance to the place is just there, beyond the landing of the elevator. Luckily for Ilya, there is only a final key that he must be accountable for, that of the apartment door. Marie unlocks it and holds it open for them both to step inside before she hands it to Ilya. It doesn't escape him, either, that there's only one copy of each of the keys. They'll really have to go everywhere together, if they intend to leave the apartment at all.

The door opens into the foyer of the place, and Ilya takes a quick look around, mostly noticing the natural light—lots of windows, like he likes—and the advertised terrace beyond the patio doors in the adjoining living room. Even here in the entryway, there is the distant looming Eiffel Tower, visible through the windows. He looks to Shane, to see if he's noticed. If he likes it, too. If he feels the same anticipation tightening in his chest that Ilya does, stepping into this apartment for the first time. Shane is also looking out the windows at the view.

Marie claps her hands, like a teacher might, trying to get the attention of the class. "Okay! Here it is, *voilà*. Would you like a tour?"

"No, thank you," they say at almost the same time. Ilya wonders if they're being a little too obvious, if there's a big sign on their foreheads that reads, *We Are About to Fuck*. Marie, oblivious or polite, does not seem to notice.

"No, thank you," Ilya repeats, glancing at Shane with a smile he doesn't bother to bite down. "We will be fine."

"Okay. Well, if you need anything, *Monsieur Rozanov*, you can always call, yes?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"*Merci beaucoup*," Shane adds.

"*Bonnes vacances! Bonne journée!* Goodbye!" Marie says, and then is out the door, and they are alone again.

“She was nice,” Shane says. “Do you think she knew who we...?”

“No.”

“Yeah, she didn’t know us at all, did she? She asked me if we were college students, in the elevator.” Shane laughs, and Ilya thinks maybe it’s relief. Maybe it’s the first time in Shane’s life he’s been assumed to be someone other than who he is.

There is a little woven mat to the side of the door, and they kick their shoes off and toss them in its direction. Shane’s hand is still on his luggage, and he’s looking around the living room, hesitating a little to go any further. He seems slightly surprised when Ilya comes up around him, wraps his arms across Shane’s shoulders, and kisses him. Shane’s lips are still cold from the outside air. Ilya doesn’t pull away until they’re hot under his mouth. Shane is smiling when he does.

“Let’s go in, *Monsieur Rozanov*?”

Ah, there it is. He knew Shane wouldn’t be able to resist. Ilya pushes him gently into the wall, tilts Shane’s head to the side, so he’s murmuring in Shane’s ear. “See what happens if you call me *Monsieur Rozanov* again.”

Shane laughs again, a little breathless, and says, “*Désolé, Monsieur Rozanov, ça n'arrivera plus—*”

Ilya picks him up with two firm hands under Shane’s thighs. He swings Shane’s legs around his waist, carries him to the first appropriate place he can locate, a wide bouclé couch in the center of the living room, and deposits him down on his back, looming over him and swallowing the rest of Shane’s French bullshit down with his tongue.

They fuck on the couch in that position, Ilya’s dick worked out of his pants, Shane’s sweats at his ankles, Shane on his back the whole time so they don’t make a mess on the fancy cream fabric. Shane is already worried about what the nice lady will think of them, wants to make a good impression. Always so concerned with being a good boy for everyone. Ilya wonders if it’s actually twisted of him to be so jealous of this. To want that attention always on only him.

After, proprieties out of the way, they pull their clothes on and do the tour themselves. The place seems to charm Shane immediately, ever the real estate aficionado, and he has a lot to say as they stroll through the rooms. He points out the parquet floors— real wood, oak, Shane insists— and the hand-molded ceiling medallions, about which he wonders more to himself than to Ilya whether they are original to the apartment or a newer installation. Ilya finds he is soggily, pathetically happy to wander behind Shane and listen to him ramble about light fixtures and the provenance of the kitchen tiles. His own feelings about the apartment are much more pedestrian: it’s spacious, though understandably smaller than even Shane’s Montreal condo and smaller still than his Boston house, and bright even in the gloomy winter sun, and beautiful, and— most importantly of all— private.

Ilya goes back for their suitcases and wheels them both toward the larger of the two bedrooms, before Shane can put up some meaningless protest about taking the second room. As if that would ever happen. As if Ilya isn’t planning to spend every stolen minute they get

with each other wrapped around Shane's body, as close as he can possibly, physically manage. Shane follows him, and thankfully says nothing, and puts his hands on Ilya's shoulders and kisses him. Then, wanders into the bathroom, to ogle the claw-footed bathtub and the walk-in shower. He seems traumatized by the accommodations at the hotel, mentions at least three times how nice the shower here is in comparison. Ilya only cares about the shower insofar as he wants to find out whether he can fuck Shane comfortably in it.

Finally, they walk out onto the terrace, which wraps greedily around both the living room and the master bedroom and which is every bit as picturesque— and romantic, as Shane maybe feared— as advertised, a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower over the rooftops, probably worth Ilya's twelve grand by itself.

There is a long table in the center of the terrace, not set as in the Airbnb photoshoot, but still optimistically poised for the potential of dining outside. Ilya can't imagine they will be doing much of that unless they plan to get rained on, but there are also some rattan chairs to sit in and enjoy the view. And smoke, which is what Ilya badly wants to do right now, maybe because this morning is already so full of his other vices, Shane and sex and delicious food, and because he already feels like he's gotten away with something he shouldn't, being here at all.

Fuck, Ilya thinks, Shane was supposed to be on a plane already. And here's here, instead. It can't be real.

"It's six-thirty AM back home now," Shane says, almost apologetically. "I should probably call my mom, and my coach..."

"Yes," Ilya says. "Probably I need to do this, too."

"I'll go inside," Shane says, and then Ilya is alone on the beautiful terrace. He looks behind him to see if Shane is in the living room, but he's stepped into the bedroom to make his calls. Coast clear, Ilya pulls out his cigarettes and lighter from his coat pocket, his fingers jangling the keys he received from Marie as he does.

The first drag of smoke into his lungs feels like almost the final straw of Ilya getting things today that he doesn't quite deserve.

"Hi, honey," Mom says on the phone. She doesn't sound as tired as before, at least, so maybe she got some sleep after Shane's panicked call in the middle of the night. "Are you okay?"

"Hi, Mom. I'm fine."

"Okay, good. It's not too crazy over there?"

Shane wonders if his mom is imagining an apocalyptic ash cloud over Paris right now. “It’s not crazy at all. You wouldn’t know there’s a volcano erupting anywhere.”

“I was looking at hotels,” his mom says, because of course she was. Of course she’s on top of this. He should have told her sooner not to bother. “They’re insanely expensive right now, of course, but I can send you some options—”

“It’s okay, Mom. I already took care of it.”

“Okay. You found somewhere nice?”

Shane stares at the spacious bed in the bedroom he plans to share with Ilya and thinks, yeah, really fucking nice.

“Yeah. It’s really, really nice. It’s an, uh, Airbnb? Like an apartment, not a hotel. I can send you the listing, if you want to see.” He’ll have to ask Ilya to send it to him, or get his hands on Ilya’s phone again, which gives Shane a jolt of nervous excitement to think about.

“Sure honey, I’d love to.”

“You can see the Eiffel Tower from the terrace,” he adds, like he needs to really sell it.

“Oh, wow. I’ll have to tell Dad, he’ll definitely want to see the pictures.” She makes a noise that is somewhere between a sigh and a huff. “I’m sure it’s not ideal, being stuck in Paris all by yourself, but hopefully you’ll make the best of it.”

It would be extremely easy to lie, right here, the way Shane has gotten too used to doing to his parents. *Yeah, it sucks. Wish the team was here, too. Yeah, or Rose, right.* But fuck, Shane doesn’t want to. Because... because he’s just so fucking *happy*, to be here and not be alone, not alone at all, in fact. In fact, he’s with the single other person in the world he wants to be here with the most. He just... doesn’t want to lie about it. It feels something like a betrayal to even consider it.

And it’s like they said, in the hotel, isn’t it? They can use this to change the narrative a bit. Lean into the act of god, let it be the convenient excuse Shane has been waiting for. He can test it out a little, right now, and at least then he’ll be telling his mom something half-true. Which is at least better than a whole lie.

“Actually, Mom, I’m not alone.” Once Shane says that, the rest is surprisingly easier. “I’m here with, uh, Ilya Rozanov.”

“Ilya *Rozanov*?” Shane winces at the surprise his mom doesn’t even try to hide.

“Yeah, we were both at the hotel, and now we are both stuck in Paris, so we decided to just, um, split the cost of a place.”

“Wow, Shane,” Mom laughs, which is probably a good thing. “Stuck with Rozanov in Paris. Not sure that’s much better than being alone.”

That is more or less what Shane expected his mom to say, but her casual disdain still lands sourly in his gut. “He’s fine. He hasn’t been so bad. So far, at least.”

“Well, hopefully he behaves himself.”

Shane’s mind is a fucking traitor and goes immediately to the image of Ilya’s dick hovering over his mouth this morning, the first splash of his cum landing on Shane’s tongue. Jesus Christ.

“Yeah, I’m sure he will. I gotta go, Mom. I still gotta talk to Coach Theriault.”

“Yeah, of course. Don’t worry, honey, I’m sure you’ll be back before your next game.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I will. Love you, Mom. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Love you too, honey,” she says, and she’s gone.

Shane clutches the phone and thinks, well, at least it’s a start. At least she only responded with a joke and not actual horror at Shane and Ilya staying together. He has the wild idea of FaceTiming her at some point in this *vacation* while Ilya is there, have them talk to each other. That is still too insane to imagine, his two worlds colliding to that degree. But, maybe he can drop comments into the conversation when he talks to his parents— *oh, Rozanov said something funny*, or *Rozanov found a good restaurant*, or, fuck it, *Rozanov asked me to call him Ilya, so that’s who we are to each other now. Ilya and Shane*— and oh my god. This is fucking crazy. His parents know that he’s here with Ilya, now. He is really, really *in it*.

He does not mention Ilya to Theriault when he calls him, because of course it’s not relevant. His coach doesn’t care where he’s staying, though he asks Shane the obligatory question about it, but all Shane has to say is yep, it’s taken care of, and Theriault is glad to not have to pretend to care much. They chat about the game on Tuesday, which Theriault reminds him of like he is kind of blaming Shane for the team’s predicament and not the actual volcano causing it. Home game against Tampa, probably not a real threat, but still a problem for Shane to miss it. Luckily, still early to worry too much about the playoff race. And Rozanov is stuck in Europe, too, Theriault’s heard, so Boston is in an equally shitty spot. But hopefully, this is a very temporary delay, and Shane can be home before then, home by the weekend. Shane just says *Yeah* and *Okay* into the phone a lot and hangs up as soon as he feels like it’s acceptable.

After, he wanders out into the living room to see what Ilya is doing. Ilya is still on the terrace, smoking, which makes Shane want to throw open the door and yell at him that the listing did *not* say it was okay to smoke on the terrace. But he’s also on the phone, gesturing into the air, so Shane restrains himself and goes to the kitchen instead, peruses the built-in refrigerator— another tasteful, modern choice that does not detract from the more traditional architectural motifs— and takes stock of what’s in there. Marie or maybe her rental management team has lined the door with bottles of Evian and Perrier, a nice touch. There is a bottle of white wine and a bottle of decent-looking champagne, or what Shane assumes must be, lying on their sides on one of the shelves. The suggestion of the champagne makes Shane feel briefly hot and embarrassed, the thought that Marie would assume the two of them would be here to celebrate something. An anniversary. Or like, a wedding.

But probably, it's just something they do for any guests who stay here. And besides, there are two bedrooms. The listing says up to four guests. Marie wouldn't just assume the two of them are anything at all.

Shane pulls a Perrier out of the fridge and sips at it while he thinks about what they will need to take care of, if they're going to be here for a while. Groceries, probably. For ginger ale, which hopefully they'll be able to find. Ilya will probably want beer or something. Protein powder, almond milk. Do they sell adaptogens here? I mean, it's Paris, it's a major city, surely they have everything. Shane will also probably have to find stuff that is at least decently healthy and easy to cook, otherwise Ilya might end up force-feeding him more croissants and insisting on eating garbage for every meal.

It hasn't actually been too terrible, finding stuff to eat. The French eat way more red meat than Shane usually allows himself, but in a pinch it's enough for his protein goals and every single brasserie or bistro has *steak frites* on the menu. And there's almost always at least one fish plate available, although it's usually cod, and Shane would prefer salmon. Of all the places he could get stuck in the middle of the season, when nutrition and his regimen really matters, Paris isn't the worst.

Oh, and like, condoms, and lube. They will definitely need those.

He also needs to find a laundry service for the two of them. Shane's last clean shirt is the one he's wearing, which Ilya has already fucked him in, so the situation is pretty dire. He sits down at one of the creamy leather bar stools at the kitchen island and starts searching for home pickup options. They're twice as expensive as the service he uses in Montreal, but oh well.

He's in the middle of the reservation— same-day premium, extra charge for pickup as soon as possible— when he hears the patio door open and Ilya step back into the room from the terrace. He crosses over to Shane and slips his icy fingers up into Shane's shirt from behind, dragging across Shane's stomach, kissing wetly against the crook of Shane's neck. He smells like cigarettes. Shane gets hard from it right away, the most ironic Pavlovian response in the world, probably.

"You're fucking cold," Shane says, flinching even as he leans back into Ilya's embrace.

"Yes, so cold, is winter outside. And you're so warm," Ilya purrs in his ear. He slips one frigid hand into Shane's waistband and wraps it around his dick.

"Hold on, hold on," Shane says, unconvincingly, trying to finish the checkout so he doesn't lose the reserved pickup time. The cold on his hot skin feels amazing, another new thing he doesn't know why he didn't think of sooner. Maybe he can try it out on Ilya, hold an ice cube in his mouth the next time Shane blows him.

Ilya strokes him purposefully, not listening, of course. Shane didn't really expect him to. "I think you can multi-task, Hollander," he says, smearing precome around Shane's cockhead.

Shane makes it to the payment screen, mercifully pre-filled with the credit card information saved in his phone, and submits it, waits for the cheerful confirmation page proclaiming

13h45 - 14h15 approximate pickup, and then drops his phone to the counter and sinks both hands into Ilya's hair and holds Ilya's head against his neck so Ilya can suck a fat bruise into it while he strokes Shane. Ilya pulls Shane's cock out all the way— a good idea, since this is also Shane's last clean pair of underwear— and makes him come, bent halfway over the marble countertop, in about a minute and a half. Shane catches his breath and slides back down into the bar stool and gazes at Ilya's self-satisfied smile, washing Shane's cum off his hands into the sink, red spots still on his cheeks from the chill outside.

"Can you take out your dirty laundry?" Shane asks.

"You are going to do my laundry, Shane?" Ilya says, looking delighted by the idea. He opens the refrigerator, sees the options are water and wine, and closes it again.

"I ordered a service. I don't know about you, but I only brought clothes for a few days."

"Yes, same. I was thinking of going shopping."

"Oh," Shane says, and briefly imagines it, the two of them in a store together.

It would be fine. Right? It would be fine. It wouldn't read as like, a date thing, not that Ilya proposed it as one. And it wouldn't matter if it did. Because no one knows who they are here. Except maybe the odd tourist, who might snap a photo and upload it to Twitter, but that's what they're trying to do, right? Trying to slowly introduce the idea that they are in Europe together. As like, fellow players, in a unique situation together. Which probably means it's fine for them to go shopping together. Friends would do that, too.

"Shane." Ilya is watching him calmly. "Is no big deal."

"I didn't say it was a big deal. I didn't say anything."

"Yes, but you look like, ah, Vietnam flashbacks are happening in your head." Ilya mimics the sound of explosions going off. "Is just *shopping*. You are always scared about everything."

"Sorry."

"Don't say sorry." Shane smiles, and Ilya smiles wider. "You are about to say sorry again, yes?"

"No. Maybe."

For a moment, Ilya looks soft, fond, staring at Shane. Then, he seems to come back to himself a little. "Okay, I will go get my laundry, and then we will go shopping after laundry pickup. Yes?"

"Okay."

They end up dumping their laundry onto the living room couch. The website assured Shane that the service includes sorting by color and fabric care and so it doesn't matter that Shane's stuff and Ilya's stuff are both piled together, at least not for the purposes of cleaning it. It doesn't matter— or it *shouldn't*— that their clothes, for the most part, are the same sort of

athletic gear that means it's not immediately obvious to Shane which shirts are his and which are Ilya's, that they look like they belong together in this pile, that it could all be Shane's or all be Ilya's and that they will probably have to spend some time disentangling the laundry into *Ilya's clothes* and *Shane's clothes* later, and that some might end up in the wrong pile. This shouldn't be, like, some huge thing. Some monumental thing. Shane feels like he shouldn't stare at the pile and feel like it is something terribly, wonderfully important.

The laundry service calls Shane at one forty-five to let their courier in downstairs. Ilya gives him the set of keys, and he manages to get each one wrong at every step— the main gate, the elevator, the front door. They're all old, and identical, and Shane doesn't even use keys at home, and he's slightly terrified he's going to lose one or all of them in the five minutes it takes him to lead the courier upstairs, laundry bag in hand, and through the front door. She collects the pile of their dirty clothes, shuffles it into the bag, and tears off a sheet from her notepad with his reservation number on it and an approximate time he can expect their clothes to be washed and ready for delivery written underneath.

"We will call, of course, for a time that is convenient for you," she says, in French, reiterating why he paid another fifty euros for the bespoke service option. "We are open until twenty one thirty tonight."

"Okay, wonderful, thank you," Shane says, clutching the receipt.

"Ready?" Ilya says, after she's gone.

"Ready."

Ilya finds a keychain he likes in a tourist shop first. It has a large, tacky plastic tag on it that proclaims *I Heart Paris*, and it costs eleven euros for some reason. The keys feel better in his pocket as soon as they are secured together.

Ilya has a rather mean desire to force Shane to go to Jean Paul Gaultier with him, just to see him squirm, just because he hasn't forgotten that Shane is apparently doing an ad campaign with Dior while almost certainly having never shopped for anything himself without a Nike or a Reebok logo on it. They end up, instead, at an H&M that Ilya finds nearby on his phone, which itself is a little adventurous for Shane Hollander. Ilya stocks up on enough underwear and socks and basics that he probably doesn't need to worry about the clothes the cleaning service took away anymore. Shane buys two packs of the same socks and boxer briefs and four identical white tee-shirts. Ilya imagines opening Shane's closet at home and finding it full of the same outfit, one for each day of the week, like a cartoon character.

They are starving afterwards, and it's cold and already darkening outside, and Shane insists there are still groceries and *stuff* they have to get. Ilya can tell by the way Shane says *stuff* that he's talking about something he's embarrassed to say out in the open, so it's probably condoms and lube. Ilya brought some of each but not enough of either with him to Europe,

not exactly expecting the hard right turn into sex-soaked ecstasy his life has taken in the last twenty-four hours. The pressing need to get *stuff* sorted out, so Shane can relax with the knowledge that Ilya has everything he needs to fuck him inside out later tonight, spurs them into grabbing to-go ham and emmental sandwiches for lunch, which they inhale and which are just as delicious as the pastries from breakfast. Ilya is probably going to overdose on bread by the time he leaves Paris, and will be happy to die doing so.

They find a rather enormous supermarket, not far from the apartment, that isn't all that different from what Ilya is used to in the United States. It has everything they need, *stuff* included. Shane buries the condoms and lube at the bottom of the cart and fills it with boring, healthy stuff. Ilya throws two baguettes and a whole container of madeleines in before Shane starts making comments about his eating habits. Shane wonders aloud if the store carries fucking *adaptogens* and Ilya laughs so loud that Shane hits him with a box of cereal to shut him up.

It is probably the single best day of Ilya's entire life.

The first thing Shane does when they get back, after they put away the groceries, is fix protein shakes for both of them. He makes them separately, one with almond milk for himself, and one with normal milk for human beings, for Ilya.

It is around that point that Ilya starts to feel almost scared, with the enormity of it all, the two of them in the kitchen making fucking food for each other. Scared that he will get used to this, too used to it in too short a time, and that he'll never be able to go without, after. He wants this tomorrow, too, and the day after, and the day after that. Shane, fixing their protein shakes and calling him a kid because he wants to buy cookies at the store. He wants all of this boring, tiny, normal shit with Shane, forever.

The laundry service calls and is back with their clothing thirty minutes later, neatly folded, like colors with like. Ilya watches Shane fish out his stuff from the mixed pile and reverently place it into drawers in the bedroom.

"Do you think we will be here for so long?" Ilya says, as Shane is folding away his shirts.

"I do this all the time," Shane says. "I don't like living out of a suitcase."

"Of course you don't," Ilya says, trying to make it sound like a chirp, fearing that it comes out far too swooning and fond to fool anyone.

The first time the Eiffel Tower's lights come on, it has exactly the intended effect on Ilya that it is meant to have. He's standing in the kitchen, trying to make something happen with the groceries he bought and the baguettes, and Shane is reading and re-reading an online recipe to make baked salmon and quinoa and getting nowhere with it, and then suddenly from outside the french doors there is a twinkling glow in the sky, like a huge Christmas tree, and they both look out and see that it's actually the fucking Eiffel Tower, and it's glittering beautifully in the dark just beyond the terrace's vantage point with a million golden lights.

"What the fuck," Ilya says, which is what he imagines they were going for.

They hurry outside to see it, not dressed correctly at all, and stand shivering on the terrace. The light show lasts five minutes, and halfway through Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's shoulders and buries his face in Shane's neck and doesn't even see the lights anymore and thinks, this was worth twelve grand, this is worth twelve million dollars.

Ilya gets to test whether it's possible to fuck Shane in the shower, later— yes, but not all that comfortable, oh well. They end up on the bed anyway, damp, their skin sticking together where Ilya grips Shane's ankles, where his thighs meet Shane's thighs. Shane falls asleep draped over Ilya, which feels like a present Ilya shouldn't even accept, another thing he will want to keep long after he's allowed to have it.

Ilya wakes up at some strange time in the middle of the night and Shane isn't there. At first, he's convinced that everything about this has been a dream, that he is at home in Boston and the acclimation to Eastern Time has him imagining the sort of perfect, impossible scenarios only his subconscious brain could choose to torture himself with. But the bed is not familiar, and there's a light on in the kitchen which he doesn't remember turning on, which means it's Shane, and they really are in Paris together, and all of that has Ilya dragging himself out of bed and into the living room to find him.

Shane is sitting at the kitchen counter, scrolling on his phone. He looks up at Ilya like he's been caught doing something wrong.

"Sorry, the jet lag..."

"What are you doing?" Ilya says, already bracing himself. For the other shoe to drop, for his father's voice to ring out, for the inevitable crash landing. *I can't stay here, I found a hotel, I can't do this after all.*

Shane turns his phone around and hands it to Ilya. It's open to a news article about the volcano.

Ilya's heart twists in his chest. "It stopped erupting?"

Shane smiles. "No. I was checking."

Ilya is so relieved that he is afraid of what he might say if he speaks. Instead, he crosses the rest of the distance to Shane and sinks against his body, buries his face in Shane's hair, smells the shampoo that they bought— to *share*, Jesus Christ— and tries to will his heart to stop stuttering against his rib cage.

Against Ilya's chest, Shane breathes, "I'm really, really happy."

He kisses Shane, there in the sparse kitchen light. They both pretend that Ilya's eyes aren't wet when he pulls away.

I keep telling myself I'm going to give myself more of a lead time between posting chapters, so I have more time to write ahead, and then I end up posting anyway 😊 make it make sense.

Thank you for reading! Please drop a comment if you enjoyed the fic, I read all of them. I try to respond but I am bad at saying meaningful stuff in response to comments other than "thank you so much I live for comments you have no idea." Sorry about that.

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](#). Come say hi to me over there!

Chapter 5: Try to be happy, just to set an example

Chapter Summary

Is this what looking at art is supposed to make you do?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Jacques Prévert.

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

Ilya wakes up with warm breath on his chest and black hair tickling under his chin. Fuck, it's perfect. Another perfect thing. First thing in the morning, and he won't get out of this bed until he fucks Shane, no matter how badly he has to piss right now.

"Mmm..." Shane makes little sounds as he stirs slowly awake, totally unguarded, delicious. "Morning."

"Good morning."

Second time in two days he's woken up with someone else. Second time in his life, also. He almost wants to say it out loud, to Shane, to commemorate the occasion, but then he realizes that if Shane says anything back other than, "Same," Ilya is going to be ruined by it. So he says nothing.

Instead, he straddles Shane lazily, slips his hand between their bodies, and rolls Shane's soft dick in his palm until it's hot and hard and Shane is smiling with his eyes still half-closed.

"Oh, wow. Hi," Shane says.

"Hi."

The bed smells like warm bodies, like trapped heat. Shane's mouth is dry and stale when Ilya slips his tongue inside, which makes it better, because it's something Shane probably finds disgusting, and he's letting Ilya do it anyway.

He fingers Shane open, a little surprised he's getting it this easy, that Shane doesn't put up even a token resistance, something like "Let me brush my teeth first." Just, "Oh, wow. Hi," and he's ready to get fucked as badly as Ilya wants to fuck him, pushing back on Ilya's fingers, moaning into Ilya's mouth. He's perfect.

The sex is slow, neither of them trying too hard, Shane on his side and Ilya fucking into him from behind, holding one of Shane's heavy legs up with a hand under his thigh, hooking it over Ilya's hip. They have no itinerary, nowhere for Ilya to be except up to the hilt in Shane's tight asshole, his favorite place in the world. Shane's hand is curled in Ilya's hair, his eyes closed. Ilya stares at Shane's side profile, which looks adorably serious. He does this when he's concentrating on not coming, brows pulling together, looking like he's running plays behind his eyelids.

"Ah, Ilya, fuck, please..."

Shane always says *please*, like he's asking for permission. He wants to hear Ilya say it, he wants to be allowed. Ilya knows that's all it will take. That's all Shane is waiting for.

So Ilya sucks Shane's earlobe into his mouth and whispers, "I want you to come on my dick right now," and Shane shoots off into the wrinkled bedsheets, and that's all it takes for Ilya, too, it turns out.

Shane is still in bed when Ilya gets out of the shower, which is a surprise. Ilya figured he might be doing something insane, like morning yoga. He's scrolling on his phone and squinting his eyes adorably, like he's straining to read.

"Need glasses?" Ilya says.

"I have them, actually, to read," Shane says casually, like he hasn't just given Ilya the most important information he's ever heard. "I never bring them on roadies, though."

"That is a shame," Ilya says, grinning, imagining Clark Kent-style glasses on Shane. He will have to demand pictures in the future. "You are reading about the volcano?"

"Yeah. Still erupting. *Eyjaflallajökull*."

"What?" Ilya shrugs into a pair of the new boxer briefs he bought yesterday.

"That's the name of the volcano. *Eyjaflallajökull*." He says it carefully, pronouncing each syllable, *ey-yah-fyat-la-yoh-cool*, like he's expecting Ilya to repeat after him. Like it's important that they both know this information by heart.

Yes, Ilya thinks, of course Shane decided it was important to learn Icelandic in the last couple of days.

"They're saying it could be weeks before flights are running again," Shane says, in a tone Ilya can't quite read.

Ilya being gone for weeks would probably fuck the Raiders' chances for the playoffs. Shane's probably thinking something similar. On the other hand, they can fuck each other raw as a consolation prize. *C'est la vie*.

"And there's news about us. Not anything about us being together, but like, both of us being stuck in Europe after the Global Series. Man in the Crease said it's God's gift to the Admirals."

“Ah.” Ilya can see wheels turning in Shane’s head, a sign that Ilya will not like the next thing out of his mouth.

“You don’t think people are going to go look for us, now that they know we’re here, or anything?”

Ah yes, there it is. Shane Hollander’s beautiful mind, finding its groove again in unfounded paranoia. Ilya sits down close to Shane to pull on his jeans.

“No. Probably not. I think any Canadian or American tourists stuck in France are probably too worried about themselves to look for famous hockey players in Paris.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right. Still, we should probably be careful, uh, when we’re outside.”

“It would not be good? A picture of us on the street. Show we are becoming friends.” Ilya finds Shane’s thigh over the sheets and squeezes.

“Yeah. *Friends*. So, like, don’t grab my ass in public or anything. Please.”

“Obviously, Hollander. Okay.”

Now that Shane has drawn the line, Ilya knows that all he’s going to want to do is test what Shane will let him get away with in public.

Ilya eats three madeleines while Shane is in the shower, standing on the terrace in bare feet on the cold floor, thinking about how the Eiffel Tower looked and the way Shane was so warm in the cold. His phone vibrates, and he looks down and sees Alexei’s name on the screen and reflexively sends the call to voicemail. Alexei wouldn’t leave a voicemail for any reason, unless their father was actually dead. If it was money, he’d send a text.

Ilya waits three minutes, five minutes, seven minutes, and lets out his breath. No voicemail awaits him.

“Do you want a protein shake?” Shane asks him as he’s stepping back inside, standing in the kitchen. It’s almost too wonderful, Shane being thoughtful for him, after the morning Ilya’s already had so far. Ilya thinks maybe Shane deserves a blowjob just for asking.

“Sure.” The madeleines will stay a secret between him and *Monsieur Eiffel*.

Shane powers through two shakes while Ilya is still working on his first and scrolling through his phone. He raises his eyebrows as Shane goes to rinse out the cup a second time.

“I try to get at least eighty grams in the morning, so I can go a little easy over the rest of the day,” Shane says.

Of all the things Ilya could say about the way Shane treats his own nutrition, *going easy* would probably be last on the list. He just raises his eyebrows a second time and Shane says, “Fuck off.”

Sveta has apparently seen the news because she's texting him, maybe on her way home from a club.

«Ilyusha, you are stranded in Paris, and you didn't call me? You know I know people!»

And, *«Sasha is asking me for your number. He says you should come to his club.»*

Ilya had forgotten, actually, that Sasha was in Paris, that he owned a club here, and that Sveta still talked to him all the time. He files that information away in case he can by some miracle get Shane to agree to go to a club with him.

Sveta sends another text: *«Did you hear Shane Hollander is also there? Have you spoken to him?»*

Ilya glances up to where Shane is carefully disassembling the parts of his shaker bottle to clean them individually. Indeed he has.

Ilya deliberates a moment, before he swipes out of the conversation without replying back.

"So, is there anything you'd like to do today?" Shane says.

"Hmm, yes. I have some ideas." Ilya grins, makes it an innuendo.

"Ha ha. I mean stuff in the city. Maybe the Louvre?"

"The Louvre is museum, yes?"

"Yeah, my mom suggested it."

"Ah."

Ilya has never been one for museums. He didn't take Shane for one, either, though it is certainly a boring enough pastime for him. He wonders if he's throwing it out there out of a sense of obligation to his mother more than anything else. And Ilya still isn't sure how much time they will have together. If it turns out they need to fly home in a day or two and Ilya wasted his time doing anything other than staying in and fucking Shane all day and night, he'll never forgive himself.

But Shane did say it could be weeks. They could have the time to do all of it, together. The sex and the boring, touristy shit that might make Ilya's heart clench even more to think about doing with Shane.

Shane looks like he's fighting to say something else, too.

"I, uh, told my mom, by the way," is what he eventually says, blurting it out quickly, like it's a guilty secret he can't keep to himself anymore. "I told her that we're staying together. To save money? So she knows. My parents know."

Ilya stares at him. "You told your mom," he responds finally.

“Yeah.” Shane is nervous now. “Fuck, was that a mistake? Should I not have?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Is great, Shane. Is a big deal, right?”

Ilya does not know much about Shane Hollander’s parents, but the first people he expected Shane to test the waters with personally knowing Ilya Rozanov was not his parents. Parents are monumental, Ilya imagines, even when they aren’t the bad kind of monumental, like his father. Even when they are the way he imagines Shane’s parents to be, probably strict and almost perversely focused like all hockey parents but probably also supportive and loving for those traits to leak through in Shane in a million tiny ways. It’s a big deal for them to know Ilya is in Shane’s life in any other way than as Boston’s *enfant terrible*.

Shane looks up at the ceiling. “I’ve been trying to tell myself it’s *not* a big deal, actually.”

Ilya rests his chin on his hand along the countertop and is suddenly, terrifyingly happy again. His chest is painfully tight with it, about to burst. He thinks about Shane, on the phone with his mother, saying Ilya’s name into the receiver, making the tiniest space in his life for him.

“Yes, I will go to Louvre with you,” Ilya says.

Shane smiles. “Cool. I was looking it up this morning. The Mona Lisa is there.”

“Great. Let’s go to Louvre and see Mona Lisa,” Ilya says enthusiastically, because the only other thing he can think to say is *I love you so much I can barely breathe*.

“I’ll get the tickets.”

Ilya nods. He wants a cigarette. Something about being too happy, it never settles right in his stomach. He always has the urge to wash it down with something bitter.

“I will be right back,” he says.

“Going to smoke?” Shane says, his brows furrowed together. “You really shouldn’t, Ilya.”

“I am on *vacation*, Shane,” Ilya says, already heading to grab sneakers.

“That has nothing to do with it,” Shane says, scowling at his phone.

Ilya doesn’t answer, just slips through the terrace doors and closes them behind him. Wonders if Shane will demand, someday, that Ilya quit smoking. Wonders whether Shane would even have to, if Ilya wouldn’t just do it for him eventually, anyway. Wonders in what world, the world they live in, the real one outside of Paris, would they even be able to have that kind of say over each other’s lives.

Halfway through the cigarette, he pulls out his phone, opens it to Sveta’s messages.

Shane told his parents about them. This is probably the closest Ilya can get to responding in kind.

«*I did talk to Hollander*)))»

Sveta is still awake, because the dots start moving immediately. Ilya pockets his phone without waiting for her response. That's enough for now.

It ends up being a good day for the Louvre, raining again by the time they get to the museum's entrance, hard enough that Shane doesn't try to stop them in front of the pyramid and take a picture or anything. He feels strangely nervous about the possibility that he won't get to go to Notre Dame with Ilya. Ilya mentioned it, after all, and he's careful with his words. He doesn't mention things that aren't important in some way. When he says something and Shane doesn't understand it immediately, Shane knows there's usually a puzzle underneath, that Ilya has unintentionally let something crucial and vulnerable out in an unusual turn of phrase.

So maybe it matters that they see Notre Dame. Maybe standing in front of it with Ilya will let Shane understand what this is all meaning to him, too.

Because Shane is standing in front of the Mona Lisa— tiny, awkwardly cordoned off from the crowd behind a thick wooden banister— and Ilya is wandering the room somewhere behind him, because the Mona Lisa has proven too boring for him, and all Shane can do is wonder whether this is fundamentally any different than having a boyfriend, and *boyfriend* and *Ilya Rozanov* in the same sentence, along with the incongruous subtext of this being something he mainly suggested so he didn't look like he was ignoring his mom, is making Shane feel hot and prickly along the back of his neck. It is either the feeling he gets when he is asked questions in the media scrum about Ilya or the feeling he gets when Ilya has sidled up behind him but hasn't put his lips to Shane's skin yet. It's good and bad. Shane doesn't know exactly which, yet.

It's not that he doesn't want it. He's, like, reasonably convinced he's in fucking love with Ilya, feels like he might actually combust with how good it feels to wake up with him in the morning and fall asleep with him at night. He thinks he might be on the verge of discovering whether it's possible to come too much in too short a time, whether you can give yourself a muscle strain from kissing too hard. *Not wanting it* isn't the problem.

It's that he doesn't know what to do with how good it feels. They didn't talk about this in the hotel in Bercy, after the game, and then the volcano had happened. They didn't talk about anything after *I like you* and *I like you too*, because. Because Shane doesn't know what to do with it, any more than Ilya does. Because it feels so impossible. The circumstances around them haven't changed, even if they both have.

It feels like they're walking around someone else's life, the past two days. And the problem isn't that Shane doesn't want it. It's that he has to go back to not wanting it, at some point. To not having it. Or he has to figure out a way to have it, without his entire world crashing down around him. If that's even what Ilya wants.

So Shane is mostly trying not to think about it. He is trying to just enjoy the tiny Mona Lisa, and the way that Ilya seems to find every single painted dog in every wing of the Louvre and take a picture of it, and the fact that Shane can feel something like a boyfriend here, that this can feel something like a date, and he is just trying to not fuck it up with his stupid fucking brain for once.

Is this, like, what looking at art is supposed to make you do? Think too much?

His phone buzzes and he takes it out to see a text from *Lily*. He looks around, sees Ilya's back in front of a giant painting on the opposite wall, and opens the text cautiously, in case it's something raunchy. Which is dumb, it's not like Ilya could send a dick pic in the middle of the crowd. Still, it's a force of habit.

Ilya has sent a picture of Shane, standing in front of the Mona Lisa, peering inscrutably at it.

Yesterday, they took a selfie on Shane's phone, so now Shane has pictures of Ilya Rozanov in his phone. Now, Ilya's taking pictures of Shane, with his phone. So they have photos of each other. Are they just supposed to delete these, after Paris, whenever that is? Are they just supposed to put all of this back in a box and tuck it away under their trophies?

Before he can think about it too much— hah, right— Shane sends the picture to his mom. It's late over there, so he probably shouldn't expect a response for a few more hours. It's no big deal. It's mostly just to show her that yes, he did make it to the Louvre. It's just a photo of himself that Ilya Rozanov took.

The crowd is starting to get too big for this room, so he goes to collect Ilya at the enormous painting— *The Wedding at Cana*, which dwarfs them both, so large Shane almost feels vertigo beneath it. Ilya is, naturally, taking close up photos of the regal-looking dogs in the center bottom of the frame.

"Look, Shane." Ilya points upward. "Look at the tiny one on the table. Look at his little funny face."

Shane peers at the dog in the painting, shaking his head, wondering if anyone else on Earth knows what a fucking goofball Ilya Rozanov actually is. He almost can't believe this is the same man who knocked out Collier's front teeth last year and got another major penalty afterwards for saying his dick would fit better now. Shane can barely believe it himself.

"Do you want to go?" Shane says.

"Okay," Ilya says.

He's been surprisingly docile all morning. Shane wanted to see the Mona Lisa, so Ilya followed him to the Mona Lisa. Now, they wander through the enormous halls, Shane leading them, looking for... he's not sure. Something to make his mom happy? Something to make Ilya happy?

They come to an enormous staircase, and sitting atop it is a massive armless, headless statue of a woman, perched on a stone slab which is carved to resemble the prow of a boat. Her

wings stand open and triumphant behind her, robes billowing, hanging off her body.

There's something about it that makes Shane feel small, swept into it, like he's being spurred into movement. Like the winged woman means to direct him somewhere, or maybe repel him back. It's almost like the statue carries its own energy, just by virtue of the wind-swept fabric and poised feathers someone managed to vitalize with only marble and stone.

"That's really cool," Shane says.

Ilya nods. "Yeah, like Rolls-Royce ornament."

Shane laughs. "You would make it about cars."

He walks to the wall to read the caption. The winged woman is called *Winged Victory*. As in Victory, the actual Roman goddess, and not just a metaphor, although it feels a little like both.

Ilya pulls up google photos of the actual Rolls-Royce ornament on his phone to show Shane. "See what I mean?"

"That one has a head."

"Well, is not *exact* same." Ilya leans back, taking in the statue. "You like this?"

Shane nods. "Yeah."

"More than Mona Lisa?"

"The Mona Lisa was tiny," Shane says, with a laugh.

"Ah. You like when things are big." Ilya grins, eyebrows shooting upward. "I should have guessed that was why."

"Shut up. That's not why. It's..." Shane isn't sure exactly how to describe why he likes it, except that it gives that kind of out-of-his-own-body feeling that he gets when... "It kind of reminds me of you, I guess."

For a moment, Ilya just looks at him, slightly shocked. Then, he widens his grin a little. "You mean I look like Greek god to you?"

"Shut *up*, Ilya. Forget I said it."

"No, no, I'm sorry Shane. What part of it reminds you of me?"

Shane doesn't even know. It's something like how Ilya looks on the ice, flying past him, the only other player Shane knows that can outpace him. The way he floats, shouting, after a goal, chest heaving, arms up in a celly with his team. Shane used to hate himself for admiring Ilya even when it was Shane's team he looked casually glorious defeating, though he's long since stopped fighting against that urge; he never won anyway. When Shane is watching Ilya beat someone else, though, the broadcast camera drawing up tight on his body and face, he can really just appreciate how beautiful Ilya looks when he is winning. Sometimes, he seems

utterly unstoppable. Sometimes, watching Ilya celebrate victory– sweat-soaked, grinning wide, alive– feels a lot like watching Ilya come. Like they’ve become the same over time, melded together in Shane’s sense memory. Like if he closes his eyes on the ice, he’ll be able to feel Ilya’s teeth in his skin at the same time Ilya’s puck hits the net.

Oh, Shane thinks, maybe *this* is how art is supposed to make you feel.

“Never mind,” Shane says, without any bite to it. He pulls out his camera and steps back a little to fit the enormous statue in the viewport. He takes a few pictures, but they’re underwhelming, a poor imitation of the actual thing in front of him. Just a memento to show he was there, in the end.

They visit a few more rooms of the museum, skipping the Versailles decor and the crown jewels, wandering through the halls of Egyptian artifacts. Shane decides he has more of an affinity for statuary and physical objects than for paintings, likes how he can walk around them and appreciate the realism, the way they look like they might start flying or running away. Ilya likes hieroglyphics, the canopic jars with dog and bird heads, the massive pink granite sphynx. He takes a million pictures and jokes that photographing the mummies will release their curses.

Shane’s mom texts when they’re waiting at coat check, Ilya thumbing through lunch options in the vicinity. Shane checks his phone and is surprised to find they spent three hours in the Louvre, how it really hadn’t felt that long at all.

Nice photo, honey!

Who took it?

Shane wonders if his mom already suspects Ilya took it, if this is her way of casually broaching the subject.

Rozanov took it, he says.

She replies a few minutes later.

How is that going? He’s not being an asshole, is he?

Shane smiles. Of course Ilya is being an asshole. Shane likes when Ilya is an asshole. He just can’t say that to his mom.

It’s going fine. He’s really not a bad guy, Mom.

His heart beats harder as soon as he hits send. It’s probably the strongest defense of Ilya he’s ever given to anyone. He watches his mom’s text bubble pop up and the dots dance in the corner of the screen.

That’s really great, honey. Glad you’re making the best of it.

It feels a little bit like victory. Shane decides to quit while he’s ahead and puts his phone back in his pocket.

“Shane, Shane,” Ilya says, elbowing him to show him his phone. “There is place with pizza just around the corner. I checked, they have fish thing, so you don’t have to freak out. Let’s please go. Please.”

“I eat pizza,” Shane says, though he’s secretly thrilled that Ilya looked up the menu for him. “Just not in the middle of the season. It wouldn’t kill you to take shit like that seriously, Ilya.”

“Oh, it might. It might kill me to not have pizza. You don’t want me to die. Right, Shane?”

“You’re such a kid,” Shane says, smiling wide.

“And you are actually the asshole,” Ilya says. “I will have to tell people.”

They are finally reunited with their coats and set out toward the pizza place. The rain has temporarily slowed to a drizzle, but both of them are wet and cold by the time they arrive at the restaurant and are shown to a cramped little table in the corner. It’s nice inside, upscale, modern, emerald-green tiling up the walls and gold lettering on the signage and a long, open stretch of bar across one wall. It’s narrow between the tables, and they are close, even sitting across from each other. Shane hates the thought he has next, even as he has it: if someone saw them here, knew who they were, it would look suspicious.

Shane has developed a supernatural attunement over the years to noticing when people are looking at him. In public, in Montreal or Ottawa, the two places he normally spends all of his time, it’s a constant background energy in his life. It feels like a subliminal pressure on the back of his head, the weight of people watching him, trying not to be obvious, trying to be cool about it. Occasionally, not even giving him that courtesy. He has a face he wears when people approach him at a coffee shop or on the street or in a restaurant, a smile that doesn’t reach more than halfway up his face, polite enough, not inviting more. He doesn’t touch people’s backs when they ask him for a photo, just lets his hands hover safely in the air behind them. He says *thank you* when they say he’s their favorite player, or they’re sorry about the game, or they have his poster on their bedroom wall, or he’s their girlfriend’s hall pass. It makes it tolerable, the system he has, the rules. It stops it from being overwhelming all the time. The fact that he can’t go outside for a fucking coffee without it.

And this restaurant is filling up quickly, with tourists from the museum and regulars who probably work nearby, and he would expect to feel that prickly heat on the back of his neck by now, those glances from faces turned mostly away. It’s fucked up and he hates it, but it’s normal, it’s been the default environment he’s lived in since he won Rookie of the Year. But he doesn’t feel anything. He glances around, but no one is looking at them, like he and Ilya are just anyone, like their presence in this restaurant *together* isn’t worth the interest of anyone other than the politely bored waiter who comes to take their drink order. Do they have ginger ale? Of course they do.

Shane may actually fucking love Paris.

“You know,” Ilya says, sucking down his Stella Artois, thumbing through the photos on his phone, “Louvre museum was actually not so boring. I will go to another one, if you want.”

“I thought you’d be bored.”

“Yes, same.” Ilya grins at him. “I am learning new things about myself here. Like maybe I am almost as boring as you.”

Shane is tragically delighted by this. He taps Ilya’s foot with his under the table, thinks about how he’ll have to look up some of the other famous museums. Maybe ones with a lot of cool statues. Ilya’s pizza and Shane’s seabass meunière arrive; Ilya starts stuffing his face while it’s still molten, probably burns his mouth, his eyes watering, lips happily pursed around the food. He’s like a kid, Shane thinks. He’s just a big kid.

Ilya holds out a second piece of pizza, balanced on his long fingers. “Shane, you have to try it.”

He makes a motion like he intends to feed it to Shane. Which is objectively fucking crazy, and Shane should absolutely not do that in a million fucking years. Not out in public. The waiter could come back at any second. If he saw them like that, if anyone else in the restaurant saw them like that...

They would think they’re boyfriends. Or just like, two guys on a date, which is sort of novel but maybe not really. They’re in Paris, after all. This table is so small, anyone who is noticing them probably *already* thinks that. They’re close, and Ilya’s entire body is bending toward him, and Shane’s shoulders are forward, like Ilya is a magnet that he has to consciously try not to be pulled to. And he hasn’t been trying very hard. And no one is looking at them.

He lets Ilya feed him a bite of the pizza.

His eyes briefly flutter closed. It is *so good*. Cheese and dough and salami and more or less everything he denies himself the whole year, except for maybe the two weeks in summer that he can let himself be truly disgusting. Little burned edges on the crust and crispy bits where the fire licked the meat and then soft morsels of burrata and tomato that melt against his tongue. Fuck. Fuck, it’s so good.

Ilya jerks his hand back and makes a face.

“Okay, no more pizza.” He looks inexplicably annoyed.

“Hey! You offered it.”

“Yes, but now you are making sex face in public and I don’t like it.”

“What?” Shane laughs, incredulous, but Ilya is apparently serious. “A *sex face*, Ilya?”

“Yes. Like you enjoy it too much. That face is only for me. Do not ever do it outside where anyone else can see.”

“You’re jealous of a *pizza*, Ilya. You’re being insane.” So is Shane, if he’s being honest with himself, because this hits him about as hard as Ilya demanding that Shane suck his cock. He spreads his legs a little wider under the tiny table. “I don’t know what face you’re even talking about.”

Ilya looks hard at him, blue eyes icy. “You know exactly what face I’m talking about. Is like when you take my—”

“*Ilya*,” Shane cuts in, because they are still in public, Jesus Christ.

“You know what face. Does anyone else know this face but me? Has anyone else ever seen it?”

Shane’s face is immediately hot. Rozanov is fucking crazy, to do this at a restaurant, out in the open. Crazy, and confusing, because he doesn’t grin or wink or take a suggestive bite of pizza. His face is hard and a little guarded. He seems authentically jealous, authentically demanding a serious answer from Shane.

And Shane could lie, or stretch the truth. Say, of course someone else has seen his face during sex. He dated Rose Landry for a couple of months, he had sex with her. Twice. Of course Ilya is not the only one.

But he knows what Ilya means. It’s not the face he made during sex with Rose. Like, of course it’s not. He’d spent the entire time imagining *Ilya*, and the second time, even that didn’t work. Shane had begged off of her with his dick soft and some bullshit about the loss against New York hitting hard. No wonder she had figured out he was gay. He’s never, ever felt as gone or as wrecked as he has with Ilya. He’s never had that same, blissful thought come over him in a wave with anyone else: *Fuck, this is so good.*

“No,” Shane says. “No one else.”

“I know so. Is only for me. It’s mine. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Ilya nods, still incredibly serious. “Good.”

The word reverberates along his skin, rolled in Ilya’s deep voice. Under the table, Ilya’s foot rubs against Shane’s ankle. Shane looks down at his untouched plate. Fuck, all he wants to do is get back to the apartment as soon as possible. All he wants to do is feel Ilya’s entire body on top of him.

“Let’s finish eating and go home,” Shane mutters.

Ilya smiles around his next bite of pizza.

“Yes.”

Ilya waits for the Eiffel Tower light show tonight, knowing now that it’s coming. He’s dressed appropriately this time, wearing his coat and socks and shoes. It’s a convenient

excuse, too. It allows him to bring his cigarettes and lighter outside, tucked in an inside pocket, without Shane huffing at him from the kitchen.

The day still hums in his veins, the way that perfect memories do when they are working their way into your marrow, burying themselves in order to be dredged up later when necessary. The morning, with Shane's hair tickling him. The museum, Shane's quiet footsteps, the way he naturally leaned in, so as not to have to talk so loudly. The food, so effortlessly good, and feeding it into Shane's pliant mouth. The Uber back after, Shane's hand squeezing hard into Ilya's thigh the whole time, thumb stroking an absent line back and forth. Shane wanted to fuck in the bed, missionary and basic, and made it fucking hot anyway, kissing Ilya sloppily the whole time, his tongue stretching out of his mouth, his hands running everywhere, reaching down between them and cupping Ilya's balls when he started really pounding into him. Ilya had spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out the claw foot bathtub, after, too stubborn to give up and take a shower, determined to lounge in it with his limbs sticking out like a decadent Tsar.

And now, feeling the residual warmth of a perfect day, Ilya feels good enough to temper it with a glance through his phone. It has needled him all day, the call from Alexei. There has been no follow up text, no *Give me money, faggot*. So the call was about his father. And his father has not called him in a while, weeks. As if too feeble to even work the phone anymore. Or too confused to remember who Ilya is entirely, now.

But there haven't been any other missed calls. So his father is still alive. Probably.

The lights go on right on the hour, and Ilya tries to take a photo, but it's a blurry mess, a poor approximation. He deletes it, and pulls on his cigarette, and tries to be satisfied that he'll at least have the memory, clear as day and tinged with nicotine.

Shane opens the door just enough to slip outside, too. He takes in the lights, his nose wrinkling. Ilya can see him try to keep the thought to himself, can see him failing, until it ultimately spills out of him in less than thirty seconds: "Marie didn't say smoking was allowed."

Ilya groans theatrically. "We are in France. Smoking is expected."

Shane takes a beat, suddenly thoughtful. "Is that why you smoke? Is it a European thing? Are all of you like this?"

Ilya laughs out loud. "What the fuck are you talking about, Hollander?"

"Sorry. That's probably messed up to say. Not like, *all* of you. But everyone here smokes, so."

"Who is everyone? We are in France. I am Russian. Is completely different place."

Shane, who has never met a question too obvious or too pointless, says, "Well, does everyone smoke in Russia?"

Ilya takes a long drag around his stupid smile. "That is beside the point."

He reaches for Shane, pulls him close against his chest with an arm around his shoulders. Shane has always treated Ilya's smoking like it's his own personal failing, acknowledging it only insofar as to criticize it, but he lets Ilya hold him now, blowing smoke away from Shane's face, watching the lights twinkle and dance along the Eiffel Tower.

"I think you like it," Ilya says.

"I don't," Shane says, unconvincingly. "It's bad for you."

"That is why you like it."

"It tastes gross."

Just to check, Ilya shrugs down and licks into Shane's mouth, swipes his tongue along the ridge of Shane's teeth. Shane's breath is hot on his face.

"Still gross?"

"Uh huh."

"Want to try it again?"

Shane's smile is languid. "Yeah."

Ilya crowds him up against the doors, thankful that it's dark out, that Shane will let him fuck around out here as long as there is plausible deniability, that they can't be seen except in silhouette. He takes a pull of the cigarette, then sinks to his knees, shrugs Shane's sweats down his thighs, and tongues his cock until it's stuck straight up, hot and red. Like the cherry of his cigarette, which he keeps gingerly out of the way between the fingers of his left hand while his right guides Shane's dick into his mouth. Shane shudders and fists Ilya's hair and comes hard down his throat, and Ilya feeds it back to him, crawling up his body and opening his mouth into Shane's, and whatever the combination of all of Shane's secondhand vices tastes like makes him kiss Ilya hard enough to bruise and come away panting and wild-eyed.

Shane offers to cook them dinner after that, maybe as a thank you, maybe as a way to force healthy food on Ilya, but he feels besotted and struck stupid by it all the same, eats the salmon and quinoa gratefully and then has two more madeleines to make up for it. He spends the rest of the night feeling like he's about to burst with irrational joy, watching the one subtitled movie they can find on French cable TV and dragging themselves to bed when they start falling asleep on the couch.

Ilya tries it out for the first time that night, whispering it in Russian into Shane's hair. *Ya tebya lyubyu*. He slips it out like he can fool himself, too, pretend it was a mistake. He says it again: *ya tebya lyubyu*, clearly enough that he'd be convicted in a court of law for it. Your honor, he said it with intention. He means what he says.

And that's what it feels like, too good, too perfect, a crime he is certain he won't get away with. He'll be punished for it, surely. The other shoe will drop, it always does. He scored his very first hat trick the week before his mother's death. He had felt it then, too, that his truly

triumphant moments were always closely chased by utter disaster. There is still Alexei's phone call, unaccounted for. There is still the chance they will be made to travel home, long before he's ready to let go of this dream.

But maybe if he cheats it out, says it to the air and not to Shane directly, he can keep it. *Ya tebya lyubyu*. It could be just for him to know, a secret between him, and Shane's soft breathing, and the white wrinkled sheets between them and the cold winter sky.

Chapter End Notes

[The little dog in *The Wedding at Cana*](#) is so important to me and Ilya 😊

Thank you for reading! Stay tuned for more Paris honeymoon courtesy of volcanic activity <3

I'm also about to go through and add summaries to all the chapters, something I didn't want to do before but now I do...

Leave a comment if you are enjoying the fic! Truly I love comments so much, what author doesn't, but seriously. I do. I love your guys' thoughts on the story, on our good sis the fujoshi volcano who is making this all happen, on Paris in general. This fic feels like pro-Paris propaganda but really I just know it the best out of all the major European cities, so it's easy to draw details up from memory. But also, it isn't NOT Paris propaganda.

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](#). Come say hi to me over there!

Chapter 6: Even if happiness forgets you a little bit

Chapter Summary

An anxious introvert and a reformed fuckboy walk into a bar.

Chapter Notes

Fuck it, have another chapter! I don't think I'm doing any more editing on this one so.

Chapter title is a quote by Jacques Prevert.

Thank you to *u/Esenina* on Reddit for the Russian help!

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

Shane has given himself an out for the last two days, an excuse to be a slob. Not exercising, not practicing, not running drills, eating only half as well as he should. He's been adjusting, unforeseen circumstances, sure, fine. He's been busy, *they've* been busy, getting situated in the apartment, and like, yeah, all the sex. And going to the Louvre, not strictly necessary, probably worth it. There's just been a lot going on.

It's just been easy, so easy, to push it off, to not think about all of the shit he gets paid insane money to think exclusively about— keeping his body and his mind in shape to justify the stupid huge salary. He doesn't *want* to think about it. He wants to crawl under the covers of this rented bed with Ilya and never come out. Thinks he might not even need to breathe anymore, except Ilya's breath. He can survive on just what Ilya exhales into his mouth and chases with his tongue.

But, despite what Ilya keeps saying, they are *not* on vacation. They are in the middle of the season, and if Shane doesn't stick to his exercise regimen, his diet, his training, he's going to be dogshit when he gets back to Montreal.

When he gets back. When he leaves Paris. When he and Ilya go back to their respective cities and respective teams and respective lives. When he thinks about it, the inevitable end, Shane's stomach churns and his chest constricts, and then he ends up pulling up the front page of *The Globe and Mail* to confirm that it's still not happening *yet*. And it's not: the volcano is *still* erupting, although maybe less profusely than before, but still mercifully spewing ash and smoke high into the air. Planes are still grounded across Europe. The news alerts Shane has set on his phone for *Iceland + volcano + eruption + Eyjafjallajökull* return mostly articles about how many millions of dollars this is costing the global airline industry.

But Shane needs to stop giving himself excuses. He needs to get serious. He needs a gym. And a hockey rink. He needs to run some drills at *least*. The longest he goes without skating is a couple of weeks in the summer, and he allows himself that because he gets an entire month of nothing but conditioning when he returns in the fall. He's going to have no such luxury when he gets back to Montreal, whenever that is. He's going to be expected to get right back in it. He's already ignoring passive-aggressive texts from Theriault and the Metros front office for not calling in to fucking team meetings. How's he supposed to captain, exactly, from across an ocean and a six hour time difference? Isn't that what the As are for?

"We need to find a gym today," he says on Sunday morning, letting Ilya's cock fall from his mouth.

"Hollander, what the fuck are you talking about?" Ilya pulls Shane up from between his legs, swipes his tongue hard between Shane's lips. "Shut up."

Shane is pressed face-forward into the mattress and his legs are kneed apart. Ilya nestles between them, smacking a print into Shane's ass cheek when Shane arches back into him. Shane bites around a moan and feels around behind him with his hand, grazes over Ilya's cock, verifies Ilya is already in the process of rolling on a condom. He wants it, of course he does, he's leaking precome all over the sheets. But he also wants to, like, plan the rest of the day. Get Ilya on board with doing something actually productive after.

"I'm just saying, we can't fuck around all day."

"Ah, no, I like to fuck around," Ilya says, guiding his dick to tease against the rim of Shane's hole, smearing lube around. "I could do nothing but fuck you all day and be so happy, Shane."

"We should, *ungh*—" Shane is momentarily distracted by Ilya's cock driving into him. "Oh fuck... we should try to find a rink we can rent out or something, too."

Ilya's heavy body sinks over him, his hands digging into Shane's waist. He sucks the skin at the highest curve of Shane's shoulder, presses a kiss to the wet spot after.

"What is this?" Ilya says. "Am I boring you?"

"I'm just—"

"Shut up," Ilya says, pulling out to where the fat head of his dick stretches Shane wide and drives it back in, hard enough that Shane gasps and falls forward toward the headboard. "If it is not *fuck me, Ilya* or *harder, Ilya*, I don't want you to fucking talk, okay?"

"Can you just—"

Shane's sentence is cut off by Ilya stuffing fingers into his mouth, which Shane decides is actually fine, for now. He sucks them deeper inside, bites down just enough for Ilya to really feel it.

“Fuck, Shane, you are unbelievable,” Ilya says, breathless, and then dissolves into muttered Russian as he fucks Shane in earnest.

Shane doesn't say anything more about the gym until after, sitting up against the headboard, putting off the shower until he absolutely can't stand the sensation of lube and spit between his legs. Ilya is rolled onto his back beside him, lazily smiling and running his hand up and down Shane's thigh, the planes of his broad chest still heaving from exertion.

“We really should go to the gym.”

Ilya groans.

“Don't be a baby,” Shane says. Ilya pinches the hip nearest to him. “Ow, hey!”

“Fine, Shane. Find a gym.”

“I gotta see about finding somewhere to skate, too. Like, a place we can rent out. Do you think they have that here?”

“In entire country? Yes, probably.”

“I could call my agent, maybe, and see if she can take care of it,” Shane says, more to himself than anyone in particular, and stretches to the nightstand to grab his phone, before he remembers that it's barely one AM in Montreal. “Fuck, never mind, she won't be awake for hours.”

Ilya pulls himself upright, pressing against Shane, skin against skin, the dark hair on his chest tickling Shane's arm where it brushes up. He pulls Shane into a kiss with fingers along his jaw, then yawns and rolls toward the edge of the bed, climbing to a standing position. Shane's focus is pulled from his phone for a moment to enjoy the view of Ilya's broad, sloping back and the perfect stretch of his ass above his huge thighs.

“I will call Svetlana, after I shower,” Ilya says. “She will probably know someone who can take care of it.”

Shane swallows the automatic sting of hearing *Svetlana*. His brain helpfully reminds him that this is the friend Ilya fucks from time to time. The one with the car business, who sounds perfect for him. Whatever.

“It's one AM in Boston, too,” Shane says.

“Yes, but she will still be awake, so. No problem.”

Ilya walks off to the shower, leaving the bathroom door half open. Shane can hear the water splatter against the glass when Ilya shakes his wet head like a dog. He smiles to no one but himself. Ilya used to intimidate the shit out of him. He remembers feeling hot and panicked in the showers after their CCM commercial, so close to hyperventilating in the locker room that he thought he might have a brain aneurysm and die. He didn't know, back then, that Ilya Rozanov was apparently a golden retriever transmuted into a human's body, shaking water all

over the bathroom and saving photos of Renaissance dog portraits in his phone and covering himself in croissant crumbs when he eats like he's five years old.

This version of Ilya is so tender and goofy, and Shane wonders if anyone else gets to see it. If anyone else loves it this much, too. Shane is, probably, terminally infatuated with the Ilya that has revealed himself in this apartment.

He looks back down to his phone, to the nearly two-hundred text messages he's been ignoring. A bunch are from the team chat, passing news articles and Twitter links around about the volcano and saying *Fuck, Hollzy, you're never coming back!* And *Dude, this is saying three weeks? The scoring race was nice while it lasted.* And saying, *Ilya Rozanov is stuck in Paris, too. So at least Boston's chances are equally fucked.*

Shane doesn't reply.

Mom and Dad have messaged in the family chat a few times, typical pictures of dinners Dad made and of Shane's Rolex ad on primetime ESPN. Shane cringes at the weird face he's making. The director had wanted "intensity", but he thinks he looks constipated. Mom is sending thinly-veiled requests for updates: *Saw rain in the forecast today, honey! Hope your plans weren't impacted!* Shane is probably going to have to call her soon.

Rose has messaged him a lot, recommendations for places to go in Paris. Of course she's been to Paris, for movie premieres, for fashion week, just generally because she's incredibly cool and stylish and glamorous. Some of the recommendations are decidedly very *gay*, clubs with names like *L'Amour Homme* that she says Miles loves. Shane feels prickly on the back of his neck as he reads it. It's a nine hour time difference from Los Angeles, where she currently is, but she says it's fine to call. Actually she says, *I miss you! So call me you fucking slut,* Which shouldn't make Shane laugh, and miss her too, but it does.

Hayden has texted him asking how he's holding up, if he's still at the hotel or if he found another one, and if he heard Ilya Rozanov is stuck in Paris, too.

JJ has asked him to bring back *sablés bretons*, specifically the ones in the aluminum box with the purple checkerboard cover.

So like, nothing is on fire. No one else on the team seems angry at Shane for not calling in, for not being super responsive, except for the front office.

Shane doesn't bother responding to any of them. He closes out of iMessage, pausing to look at the photo of *Winged Victory at Samothrace* he made his phone background last night—more professionally staged than his, still not quite able to capture its colossal presence— and then Ilya is wandering out of the shower, barely in a towel, which he immediately throws, sopping wet, onto his side of the bed and roots around naked in his drawers for a pair of boxers. That's Shane's cue to finally shower the morning fuck off of himself and start the day.

Ilya looks at him with exaggerated surprise when he starts rinsing his shaker out after only one forty gram protein shake.

“I like to stagger it if I’m working out,” he says, not sure why he feels the need to justify himself at all. If Ilya bothered to work with a trainer or a nutritionist, he would understand. “It’s not good to overload your macros before the gym.”

Ilya sucks down the shake Shane made for him, looks at him like he’s said something funny. “Okay.”

“I found a gym not too far from here. They do a day pass for twenty euros. Or we can just get the monthly membership. It’s cheaper. I’d really like to go every day. Keep up with the regular routine.”

“Okay.”

“What,” Shane says, ready to be made fun of again for caring about staying in fucking shape.

“Nothing. I am remembering the last time we worked out together. Was the night of the draft.”

“Oh.” Shane softens, feels immediately bad for being shitty a second ago. “You remember that?”

“Of course I remember,” Ilya says, which makes Shane feel warm and stupid. “I wanted to do a lot more than just give you my water bottle.”

Shane had wanted that too, immediately and viscerally. He hadn’t done much more than watch some extremely tame gay porn at that point, had been so scared and ashamed of that much that he’d clear all the evidence off his computer as soon as he came, then lie awake in his bed and hate himself for hours after. Seeing Ilya in the gym had been, in comparison, like having a porn-induced hallucination, a wet dream cataloging every detail of Shane’s fantasies about men: the sheen of sweat on his long neck, the distracting shadow of his dick in his shorts, the cant and bow of his lips as he mouthed *More* and held out his water bottle. *Suck on this*, almost. Shane fantasized for months afterward about Ilya saying it while Shane gave him head, could barely watch porn after that if it didn’t take place in a gym.

“Me too,” he says.

He can admit that now, at least. He’s gotten exactly what teenaged Shane had wanted in that half-baked fantasy. He imagines, if he met his younger self somehow, how he might react to the news that he and Ilya are currently shackled up in Paris together, that he is developing a persistent cramp in his lower back from arching into the deep push of Ilya’s cock in his ass so frequently. Younger Shane would never believe it. Younger Shane would never believe that Older Shane could call himself *gay* and not have an immediate cardiac event.

“Oh, I know,” Ilya says. “You were not, ah, subtle.”

Shane snorts a laugh. “No, probably not. I couldn’t stop staring at you.”

“Yes, same for me,” Ilya says. “But you maybe did not notice.”

Shane laughs, but thinks maybe deep down he did notice, saw the way Ilya looked him up and down like prey, knew there was innuendo laden in the stroke of his fingers against Shane's when the bottle passed between them. The electric current of inevitability had thrummed throughout that shitty hotel gym and pulsed between them, too strong to fully ignore.

When Shane thinks about it now, the way they had instantly locked on to each other, it still makes him dizzy, makes him think about *fate* and *destiny* until it all seems too big, too immense, this thing between them that has spanned so much of his life. Makes it feel like it *is* his life, the actual heart of it. Not hockey, not his family, just the moments between him and Ilya that have spread across a decade, individually so small but so *huge* in totality.

And maybe it was all of that, immense and overwhelming and fateful, but it was also just two boys in the gym together. Just like today.

"Excited to do it again?"

"Stare at you in the gym?" Ilya smiles. "Of course."

Shane is too. But he's maybe even more excited for the *gym with Ilya* part. He wants to spot him on his reps and time his intervals and race him on the resistance bike again. Somehow, that makes him sound so infatuated, so *soft*, that he's embarrassed to admit it to Ilya.

He changes the subject. "So, you mentioned you could call Svetlana about renting a rink nearby?"

"Yes. I can call her now." Ilya moves to stand. "I will send her a nice picture of Eiffel Tower first."

Shane tries to react neutrally to this, even though he kind of wishes Ilya would have this conversation with his friend-he-sometimes-fucks in front of him. And they will probably speak in Russian, anyway, so he wouldn't even be able to understand. "Cool."

"Do not worry," Ilya says, as he heads for the doors, pushing his feet into the slides he has left just inside for convenience. "She will be able to do something for us."

"I'm not worried," Shane says.

It would be nice, he thinks cruelly, if Svetlana wasn't perfect for Ilya and also, apparently, effortlessly competent.

Ilya makes good on his plan to open the conversation with Sveta with the view of the Eiffel Tower from the terrace. It is practically gossip in the form of a photo. It offers up enough details— private view, conspicuously nice location— that she will take it for what it is: an

apology for leaving her on read for days. He waits for the read receipt before he calls her. She picks up immediately.

«Wow, Ilyusha, that's quite a view,» she says brightly. Ilya can hear road noise in the background, so she's probably calling him from an Uber home. A bit of an early night for her. «Where are you?»

«An apartment in the 16th *arrondissement*,» he says fluently, wondering if she'll be impressed or laugh at him instead.

She laughs, but manages to sound tender with it. «Must be some apartment. Did you find a sugar mama for your stay?»

«Of course not,» Ilya says, «you know I paid for this. I am the sugar mama,» he adds, before realizing what that implies, that he's not here alone. Oh well, she is already assuming as much. «Anyway, I need a favor from you.»

Sveta sucks her teeth. «Oh sure, why else would you call me?»

«Don't start.»

«You haven't even asked what I want you to bring me from Paris, Ilyusha, but sure, tell me what the favor you need is.»

«I am not on vacation,» Ilya says, despite the fact that he says this five times a day to Shane. «This is kind of an inconvenience for me, Sveta.»

«Yes, I'm sure whoever is staying with you at that beautiful apartment is *inconveniencing* you.» Thankfully, she doesn't press further.

«I need to find a hockey rink near Paris to rent for the day. For practice. Do you know anyone who can make that happen?»

«I know everyone, okay? Don't worry. I will find one for you. Ilyusha, you need the rink for the whole day just to practice alone?»

Maybe he spoke too soon about Sveta not pressing further. She's too shrewd, she knows him too well. This isn't the kind of request he makes for himself. Ilya considers telling a lie, a small one, the way he's told her in the past that Jane wasn't anything serious. Although, at the time, he had been mostly lying to himself; it hadn't felt quite as blatantly false repeating it aloud to Sveta, either. Now, though, it would be something else entirely. Something Sveta certainly doesn't deserve.

«No, I am not going alone.»

«You are going with Shane Hollander,» she says, confidently, and he can hear the smile in her voice. Of course she has figured him out, before he has even said anything.

«Yes.»

She lets out a little squeal that sounds entirely too girlish for her, in his opinion. «You have to take pictures, Ilyusha. I want to see!»

«Sveta, we are just practicing.»

«You know I've always wanted to see you two on a line together. Even just practicing passes.» She huffs into the phone. «I'm doing you a favor, okay? So you better show me something good.»

«Fine. Okay. I'll try.»

«Good. Give me thirty minutes.»

«Can you get me a good car, too?»

Sveta laughs. «Obviously.»

«Thank you, Sveta.»

«Of course. Never say I don't do anything for you.»

Ilya laughs. «You do everything for me.»

«By the way, did you see my text about Sasha? He is asking me why the fuck you are not coming to his club. What do I tell him?»

From his vantage point on the terrace, Ilya can see Shane has moved to the living room, and is perched on the couch, scrolling on his phone. His brows are furrowed in concentration, and he's absently running his thumb along his bottom lip as he reads. Ilya is immediately impatient to get back inside, where he can replace that thumb with his tongue and see if he can still taste Shane's vanilla protein powder.

«Tell him I haven't been going out much, lately,» he says, before he says goodbye.

The gym that Shane found for them is spacious and more or less what Ilya is used to from home, two floors that descend underground to fit into the space Paris can afford for an athletic complex. It's big enough for rooms to be divided by the type of workout, cardio machines with other cardio machines, weight racks given their own dedicated space, a basketball court, a pool and jacuzzi and sauna fogging up its own enclosed area.

Of course, the workout devolves into a bit of competition for them both, as Ilya was hopeful that it would. He adds resistance to his elliptical, so Shane adds resistance. He puts another five kilos onto his bench press, Shane adds six. Ilya would hit PRs every workout if he and Shane did this all the time. Shane's cocky smile eventually flattens into a flat line of exertion, and the shift makes Ilya's cock twitch, makes him feel nineteen again, watching Shane's back

flex under the effort of trying to match Ilya's pace on the exercise bike. Shane's neck and chest flush, just like back then, just like every time he's falling to pieces under Ilya. Ilya wants to lick the sweat off of him. They should have seen about renting out the gym, too, so Ilya could push Shane up against the mirrored weight-room wall and show him that Ilya makes him look just like this, too.

Shane tries to get Ilya to join him for yoga, toward the end, which Ilya at first thinks might be innuendo, but is sadly exactly what's on the label. Ilya watches long enough to get inspiration for later— fuck, the way Shane can split on the ground gives him so many ideas— before he wanders off to do a winddown on the treadmill.

A girl a few machines down recognizes Ilya. He can tell from the specific way she glances over to him, placing him in her mind. He can see she's Russian in about a dozen subliminal ways: her particular shade of blonde, her clothes, the specific choice of subtle enhancement of her pretty features with professional intervention. She looks like so many girls he sees in Moscow clubs all summer, beautiful, if blandly so, familiar, accessible.

«Excuse me,» she says sweetly. «You're Ilya Rozanov, right?»

Ilya doesn't have quite the national stature in his home country that he would if he had stayed to play in the KHL, but hockey still carries an outsized, almost mythical importance in Russia, which extends even to traitors who abandon their motherland to chase glory on American teams. He never has to pay for a drink back home, even though he insists. This girl may not even watch hockey, but he's not surprised she recognizes him.

«Yes, but don't tell anyone,» he says, pressing a finger against his smiling lips. «It's supposed to be a secret.»

«Oh, I was planning to call the embassy, but I'll keep this to myself.»

This is one thing Ilya likes about Russian girls, they never advertise when they are starstruck. The banter never has quite the bite, the satisfaction, of Shane's exasperation with him, but it still feels like a harder-won victory when he takes one home than the American girls who throw themselves at him, no challenge at all.

Ilya, of course, is not going to sleep with this girl, or even get her number, not even for the cover story that is all but unnecessary in Paris. But he is, maybe, clinically incapable of not flirting with women. He flirts with his dentist with half of his face numb and both of her hands stuffed in his mouth. He flirts with the middle-aged receptionist at the Russian Consulate in New York where he is forced to make an appearance every few years. It's a muscle that he maybe doesn't even know how not to exercise. His blood is rushing through him from the workout in the same way that it does from sex, and he is probably going to bend Shane into a pretzel when they get back to the apartment, and that energy is currently being pointed rudderlessly at this pretty Russian girl. That's all.

Her name is Katarina. She's twenty-two. He catalogs her features rather absently as he listens to her talk, her perky tits, her cardio-bunny thighs and ass, her filled lips, her tight ponytail. She tells him she was a student until recently, now working in real estate, but she's building up an online following as a fitness influencer and might quit selling fancy apartments to rich

Russians within the year. Ilya nods along, lets the smile spread easily across his face, matching hers. Is he liking Paris? He should let her know if he is interested in any property here. She can run back to the lockers and get him her card. Or, he can just follow her on Instagram. He doesn't have any intention to, but he lets her bring up the profile on his phone, because this is easy and doesn't mean anything.

"Ready to go?"

Shane has appeared at his other side, towel slung around his neck, his face a storm cloud, transparently jealous, obvious enough that Ilya sees Katarina read the look and maybe come to some conclusions herself. Shane is gorgeous and oblivious and gives himself away so easily.

«Nice speaking with you,» he tells Katarina, who slinks away as easily as she came.

Shane doesn't talk to him until they're well on their way back to the apartment, scowling like he caught Ilya eating her pussy and not just having a conversation.

"Shane, you do not have to be jealous," Ilya says.

"I'm not jealous. I don't care. You can fuck her, if you want. Just let me know, and I'll leave the apartment."

"Oh my god, Shane. You are being dramatic."

Shane stares hard at the elevator doors the entire slow crawl up to the tenth floor. When they step into the apartment, Ilya reaches for Shane's hips, already lowering his head to taste the dried sweat below Shane's jawline. Shane twists out of his grip.

"You are unbelievable," he says, before he stomps away to the bathroom. He slams the door hard enough for Ilya to hear it, hard enough that if the tables were turned, Shane would almost certainly be nagging him that Marie wouldn't want Ilya slamming the doors, lest it ruin the historic artisanal wood framing or fucking whatever. Only Shane gets to do these things, when he's throwing a tantrum.

Ilya feels a hot little sting of anger, at being denied the immediate relief of Shane's body, his pouting mouth. And that Shane's opinion of him as an unrepentant whore is so deeply entrenched that everything that has happened between them since Friday at the Bercy hotel is so easily forgotten, apparently able to be wiped away in five minutes of him being *nice to someone else*. Ilya has not even slept with Svetlana since before that November afternoon, when Shane left his house, while Shane got his dick wet with a movie star and then came back to Ilya. And Ilya has been all too eager to take him, grovel for his attention, lap up the scraps. Shane's jealousy is fun when it colors his desperation in bed; without that, it's just blistering, and leaves Ilya feeling stripped and wounded. It makes him want to be mean. That can feel almost as good as getting what he actually wants, sometimes, satisfying in a different, darker way.

He pulls out his phone, scrolls deep into his Whatsapp contacts, finds Sasha's number.

«Send me the address of your club and I'll come tonight.»

Shane decides in the shower that it doesn't matter if he doesn't have a spare set of keys, he needs to get the fuck out for a while. *Dramatic*. How is that for dramatic? Maybe Ilya can enjoy himself to the fullest without Shane around cramping his fucking style.

He almost wants to leave without saying *anything*, because he feels hot and his eyes burn stupidly, it's all very stupid, the shower not even really helping, and he doesn't want to feel even fucking stupider by having his voice crack when he tries to say something to Ilya. He gets dressed and now Ilya's wet towel laying on the bed from this morning just pisses him off. Fucking dramatic.

Ilya is sitting on the living room couch and pointedly not looking at Shane, scrolling on his phone. Maybe looking at that girl's Instagram. Maybe he's already chatting with her. Shane is supposed to drink his second protein shake but all he wants to do is get out of the apartment, and he lets himself make that Ilya's fault, too, fucking up his nutrition.

"I'm going out," he says, and hurries to get his sneakers on and close the door behind him before Ilya has anything to say back.

He realizes about two minutes after he's closed the giant iron gate behind him and stepped onto *Rue DuBois* that he has locked himself out of the entire complex. He'll have to call Ilya to let him in, like an idiot, and it only serves to stoke the embarrassment roiling his gut further. Idiot. Fucking idiot.

Shane wanders past *Viennoiserie Victor Hugo*, past a pharmacy, a souvenir shop, an antique store. They haven't actually explored the vicinity of the apartment all that much, not that Shane feels like doing it now. He's just walking to walk. He's just walking because the alternative is just boiling over with frustration he isn't even sure he's allowed to feel.

It's not like he doesn't know Ilya doesn't owe him anything. He has no claim of ownership over Ilya's body or whatever. It's not like it's ever been different in all the years they've been sleeping together. Shane wants to believe that he was, at least at some point, truly okay with that. Apparently, he isn't now. Apparently, seeing Ilya talk to a pretty girl now is enough to make him want to fucking throw up. So that's great. That's awesome. Falling in love makes him act like a psycho. Act fucking *dramatic*.

He doesn't know what he can even do with that feeling, other than turn it inward and let it churn uselessly through him. There are probably five different conversations he has to have with Ilya before he can even ask for something as improbable as exclusivity.

He's embarrassed to even want it. He's embarrassed that he wants Ilya to want it. He's embarrassed to want to be enough for Ilya, to wholly consume him in the way that he does Shane. It sounds greedy, and childish, and god, *dramatic* to even want it. To want it so

fucking badly. All of him. All of him. No one should get to have Ilya, just him. Fucking stupid.

He rubs his fingers hard against his eyes, pressing the sting back down, until he sees spots behind his eyelids, until his fingertips come away dry.

His phone buzzes while he's still wandering around aimlessly.

[Lily]
are you still mad

:(

Shane puts his phone back in his pocket, keeps walking. Thirty seconds later, another buzz. Ilya has sent him a GIF of a little angry cat, its ears flat along its head, its eyes slitted.

[Lily]
you look like this when you are mad

very scary. so mean (((

For once in his life, Shane wishes he could find Ilya anything other than fucking charming. His life would be so much easier. Maybe it's all the concussions.

[Jane]
Fuck you

I'm not mad

[Lily]
you are mad (((

did not mean anything she was just fan

[Jane]
I know what you do with your fans

[Lily]
I have sexy beautiful man in my bed but he think I want girl in gym (((
is so sad what do I do

Shane doesn't know what to say, so he walks with his phone in his hand until he finds a tiny, gated park and sits on a low bench and stares up at the gray sky, trying to pluck out the threads of his emotions until he maybe figures out what he's actually upset about.

He doesn't think he actually believes Ilya wanted to fuck that girl at the gym. Or maybe he did, because she was pretty, and interested, and Ilya is beautiful and famous and talented and rich, and could have what Shane is offering him with any girl on earth, could have a beautiful

girlfriend or wife. Ilya could bring her onto the ice after winning the cup. He could show her off to his teammates. He could just be *normal*.

Shane can't be. Shane can't be normal. He can't be Ilya's girlfriend, shown off to his boys, kissed on the jumbotron. He can't thank Ilya at the next awards ceremony, post him on his socials, the way Hayden posts Jackie and his kids and their normal life that he takes completely for granted.

Shane asking Ilya for what he wants is asking him to stay a dirty secret for as long as their livelihoods depend on it. He doesn't have a choice, but Ilya does. Why would Ilya choose this misery? When even that random girl in the gym offers something easier?

Shane gives himself another fifteen minutes just to wallow in his dismal little spiral. Then, he sets off in the direction he came in, back toward the apartment. He stops at *Victor Hugo*, buys a few of each of the things Ilya tried the other day. He texts Ilya when he's standing outside the iron gate again, bag clutched in his hand, butter seeping through the paper in a widening dark splotch.

[Jane]

Downstairs. Can you let me back in?

Ilya is there in minutes, showered, each damp golden curl a perfect semicircle, pushed back from his face. His eyes flicker down to the bag in Shane's hands. He doesn't look mad anymore, either, if he was to begin with. Shane follows him back inside the complex, and lets Ilya slip his warm hand up under his hoodie on the ride up the elevator and rest at the small of Shane's back.

Shane presses the bag into Ilya's hands as soon as they are inside the apartment. Ilya opens it up and takes a long look inside, long enough that Shane starts to feel self conscious, like maybe it was the wrong thing to buy them. He's about to say something, *you don't have to eat them*, but before he can, Ilya reaches for him and pulls him close by the back of his neck, crashes their mouths together.

Shane lets his mouth fall open, lets Ilya press his tongue deep inside, lick the back of his teeth. Ilya staggers them to the wall, tripping over the shoes they've left by the door, taking Shane by the jaw, holding him in place with his strong, confident grasp. The bag of pastries is left somewhere in the entryway; Ilya hefts him up into his arms, not even pausing to break their mouths apart to find his way, carries Shane to the couch blindly, until the back of Shane's knees bump up against the arm of the couch and Ilya settles him down onto the cushions, covering Shane with his body, just kissing and kissing him, not letting him breathe, not letting him get his bearings. His mind swirls and his body is on fire, and that's all he feels, the want for Ilya, the need. He tangles his hands into Ilya's damp hair, finds the outlines of his curls, twists them in his fingers.

Shane doesn't know if he pushes Ilya down or if Ilya moves himself, but he is between Shane's legs, pulling his sweatpants off to the ground, running his hands up and down the length of Shane's thighs, rubbing his cheek against Shane's hard cock, mouthing it without closing over it. A tease. Payback, maybe. Shane slides his eyes closed and follows Ilya's movements by feel. A kiss at the base of his dick. A wet line drawn by his tongue down the

seam of his balls. Ilya hitching one thigh over his shoulder, spreading his ass with his hands, pressing a spit-slick thumb just so into the resistance of Shane's asshole. The tensed, maddening point of Ilya's tongue, piercing him, forcing him open, Ilya's thumb following, the two working in tandem but to opposite ends. Shane feels good and settled and *right* again, like all the pieces of him are back in place.

Ilya licks him open, sucks and bites and nibbles at his rim, pushes his fingers inside when the resistance falls away. His other hand snakes up the center of Shane's stomach, under his hoodie, finds the fullest part of Shane's tit and squeezes down into it, massaging and rolling Shane's hard nipple against its rough palm. Ilya finds his way back to Shane's bruised, aching dick and swallows it down to the back of his throat, works him in merciless rhythm with lips and tongue and the close press of his hollowed cheeks.

Ilya is inside him and around him and Shane lets it overwhelm him, pushes back greedily against Ilya's fingers and bucks into his mouth and comes hard and fast with a choked-back shout. Ilya swallows every bit of it, wipes his chin against Shane's pubic hair. He pulls his fingers out of Shane's ass and waits for Shane's eyes on him to draw them into his mouth. Shane reaches for Ilya, emptied out, bereft, and Ilya presses forward and kisses him sloppily, letting Shane taste himself.

Then, he pulls away, leaves Shane on the couch. Shane can hear his footsteps padding away on the hardwood, then the crinkling of the paper bag from where it was abandoned by the door. Ilya returns, sits on the floor by Shane's naked, spit-soaked hips, and tears into the bag of pastries, pulling out one of the puffy, golden croissants first.

Ilya presses the tip of the croissant against Shane's wet lips.

"Eat."

Ilya's smile goes blinding wide when Shane lets his mouth fall open, tasting fat and salt and sugar and Ilya's lingering flavor, still crowding out his tongue.

Ilya shows Shane the reservation details Sveta sends him later in the afternoon, an offering before he risks tilting the mood again. Shane is still pliant and satisfied enough that maybe he'll accept the stupid things Ilya chose to do when they were angry at each other.

"Reservation is for Tuesday," he translates. "And she says 'hello, Shane Hollander'."

Shane's eyes flicker to him. They are in the kitchen again, Ilya's croissant, fed gently into Shane's mouth, has been quickly followed up with the protein shake Shane insists he can't skip. Ilya keeps saying he'll stop after he eats the next pastry; so far, he's had a second croissant, a *pain suisse*, and a slightly different peach thing from before that is equally glorious. They will probably be stale tomorrow, so. It would be a waste.

“Isn’t that weird?” Shane says suddenly.

“Isn’t what weird.”

“Your friend, um, Svetlana. Knowing about us.”

“All she knows is that we will be practicing together.” Ilya shrugs. “I did not tell her we are staying together.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe I will sometime later, but.”

“But?”

“But I think she will figure it out herself, if I do. The whole thing.” Ilya gestures between them. “She is smarter than me.”

“Well, you do get hit in the head for a living.”

Ilya watches Shane sip at his protein shake for a bit, running his tongue over his teeth, thinking and thinking. He decides to just say it.

“Actually, I have friend here in Paris, Sasha. He owns a club. I told him I would go tonight.”

“Oh. Cool,” Shane says, looking at the wall, immediately stiff. “Well then, you should go.”

It’s not looking promising, their detente from before still tenuous and subject to breaking, but Ilya must press on. He’s a stubborn, obstinate ass. It’s the one trait he possesses that truly reminds him of his father.

“Let’s go together. I do not want to get locked out of apartment because you fall asleep at nine PM like an old man.”

“Ilya...”

“Yes?”

“You’re making me go to a club with you.” The little angry face is back.

“Yes, why not? I thought you like clubs now.”

That came out sharper than Ilya intended, or maybe just as sharp as it still feels deep down, the memory of Rose Landry’s hands up Shane’s shirt back in Montreal, how it had landed in his stomach like a bullet, lodged under his ribs, bleeding him out. Maybe Ilya’s stupid insistence that he follow through on his promise to Sasha, instead of just begging out of it, is more about that night late last year than anything else.

Do it because I asked you to, like you did for Rose Landry.

Shane blinks at the wall, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

Still, Ilya considers cancelling at least three times before they finally set out from the apartment that night, Shane in yet another white tee, like he’s going to the grocery store, Ilya in Balmain that the laundry service helpfully pressed. The incongruity doesn’t help banish Ilya’s persistent feeling that he’s leading them into disaster. What is he doing, forcing Shane to humor him like this?

Shane watches the city the whole way to Le Marais, but he lets Ilya put his hand on Shane’s thigh and squeeze gently into the muscle there, doesn’t bat his hand away. It’s a tiny victory that Ilya will gladly take.

They arrive at a nondescript, jet black exterior, wedged in the center of a narrow side street, between bars and restaurants into and out of which drunk men and women are spilling and laughing and shouting. There is a telltale rope at the door, a man on a stool who keeps checking his phone. Above him, there is a pink glow, a neon sign curved into inscrutable Cyrillic script: *Поехали*.

Shane ponders the sign like he might spontaneously learn Russian. “What does it say?”

“*Poyekhali*. Means like, *cheers*? Depends.”

They approach the bouncer, who takes one look at Ilya and says *dobryy vecher* instead of *bonsoir*.

Sasha is a good host, at least, or can guess what Ilya likes: VIP, a plus one he doesn’t have to ask for, a private booth. They’re guided through the black door and make their way down a long and narrow flight of stairs. Probably, even if Paris had room for a ground floor club, Sasha would have still put his in a basement. Russians are like vampires, they love to be deep underground.

Poyekhali is more or less what Ilya would expect from Sasha, from a Russian expat in general: a touch too dark, a touch overdressed, a lot of velvet, a lot of ornate gold shit on the walls and sexing up the bar and the VIP section. A lot of hot women, and a lot of hot men. The music is loud and wordless and vaguely pornographic. You can probably get coke off the bartender, if you’re cool about it. It’s the kind of place a teenaged Ilya would have loved to fuck in.

No longer teenaged, Ilya would probably still fuck in here, if Shane would ever let that happen. Old habits die hard. The table they are seated at is low and heavy and shadows everything beneath it; he could easily pull Shane’s dick out and get him off without anyone knowing. Ilya gets a little hard just thinking about it.

“Want anything to drink?” Shane says, stiff in his seat.

Ilya grins around the slight paranoia he feels. “You are not just making an excuse to run away?”

Shane rolls his eyes. “I’m not going to run away. It’s just a club. It’s not that bad.”

Not that bad, but he was willing to dance with Rose Landry and smile while she got him half naked in front of the entire club. Ilya will just have to keep working at it.

“Then yes. Get me whatever you will have. I’m easy.”

He watches Shane slip into the crowd, brutally underdressed for even Montreal or Boston, practically criminally slovenly here, to the point where it’s almost alluring. Or maybe that’s just Ilya’s weakness to him, the way he finds Shane to be the hottest fucking thing in any room they have ever been in together. Even in his stupid white shirt and sneakers.

«My fucking god, he has actually come.»

Ilya looks up at the soft string of purred Russian and finds Sasha looming over the table, smiling down at him. He’s wearing something flowy and open all the way down his chest, a big gold chain sparkling in the center of the vee left in the wake, gaudy and overstated and very Sasha, just like *Poyekhali*. This is his club after all, made in his image; he looks perfectly suited to his environment.

«Hello, Sasha,» Ilya says.

«Yes, yes, hello. Incredible, for you to come to my club and act disappointed to see me.» Sasha slides his tall frame into the booth beside Ilya, close enough that Ilya can see the veins streaking across his eyes, the tensed edges of his pinpoint pupils. «It’s nice to see you, Ilyushka. Sveta told me you were stranded in Paris. I figured you’d reach out after you were done fucking everything else.»

«Yes, well.» Ilya doesn’t exactly want to start the conversation by telling Sasha he’s only been fucking one person, actually. He gestures around them with his hand. «This is very nice. Your father helped you with this?»

«Fuck you,» Sasha says, affectionate in spite of Ilya’s sourness, or maybe because of it. He looks around, slips a hand across Ilya’s knee, looks back at him for a reaction. Ilya shakes his head. «You used to be *fun*, Ilya. What, you are too professional now to have your dick sucked by a man?»

«Not exactly.»

«You know, no one gives a fuck who you are here. It’s not Russia. You could relax a little.»

Ilya smiles. «You haven’t changed at all, Sasha.»

«Well, at least one of us still knows how to have a good time.»

Shane returns then with what Ilya is deeply concerned are two vodka cranberries, because Ilya said he’ll have whatever Shane is having and Shane apparently has no qualms about desecrating Ilya’s national heritage with fruit juice. He stares at Sasha, at Sasha’s arm around Ilya’s shoulders, Sasha’s hand where it’s drifted beneath the table and is resting on Ilya’s knee. He sets his mouth in a flat line, and sits down at the other side of the table, mutely pushing Ilya’s drink across it.

“Thank you, Shane,” Ilya says. Shane nods.

«Who’s this?» Sasha says, taking his time with the look he gives Shane up and down.

Ilya is not surprised that Sasha doesn’t recognize the most famous player in the MLH. It almost goes without saying. Sasha dislikes his father almost as much as Ilya does his, has made ignorance of his beloved sport a point beyond pride, into something like an ethos. He used to stick fingers in Ilya’s mouth if he ever tried to talk about it. A lifetime around hockey, and he is still staunchly opposed to being aware of any of it. Ilya finds it almost admirable.

«Friend of mine,» Ilya says.

Sasha looks at Shane, looks at Ilya, both of them staring rather grimly at each other. His smile is wide, immediately suspicious.

«Wow, the two of you must be so *fun* together.» Sasha goes to stand. «What would you like? I am going to be a good host, maybe you’ll enjoy yourself more with a bottle or two?»

Ilya nods. «Thanks. I’ll pay for it.»

«No you fucking won’t, Ilyushka. I’ll have them toss you out on the street.»

He’s looming over the table again, like a towering, ostentatious Christmas tree. He looks between the two of them, like he’s evaluating things.

«Should I send some girls over? Tell them about the famous Russian hockey star and his friend’s night out?»

Ilya shakes his head.

«All right. Well, let me know if you change your mind. Enjoy yourself, Ilyushka. It’s nice to see you.»

“Who was that?” Shane says, when Sasha has disappeared into the ozone haze of the dance floor. His voice is tight, like he’s taken a hit to the ribs and is trying to breathe through it.

“That was Sasha.”

“Oh. Cool.” Shane gives him a terse little nod, like he’s fooling anyone.

He’s too far away to be this cute and this stupid. Ilya can’t touch him across the table like this.

Ilya pats the now empty space next to him. “Come here, please, Shane.”

Wordlessly, Shane gets up from his seat and slides in next to Ilya, easy for him despite his little fearsome scowl. He tips back his drink and downs about half of it in one overly large gulp.

Then, he turns to Ilya. “So, do you have any friends you haven’t fucked?”

Jesus Christ. Back here again so soon. Ilya wants, for a moment, to ask Shane just what the fuck he wants from him. “Entire Boston team are my friends, and I have not fucked any of them.”

Shane meets his eyes, gaze hot and a little unfocused. God, is he this much of a lightweight? Is that why Ilya is getting set on fucking fire? He wants to tell him, *Sasha offered to send girls to the table and I said no. Sasha would give me head if I blinked at him twice, and I don't want anything except to kiss your angry face.*

Shane says, “Oh good. So there's at least twenty people in the world you haven't slept with yet.”

Ilya groans. “Well, I am not going to fuck him, okay? Or anyone else here. Only you.” He pinches the soft junction of Shane's hip, under the table, where no one can see in the dark anyway. “If you stop being such a bitch.”

Shane takes a long sip of his drink, darts his tongue out to catch the condensation on the full swell of his bottom lip, makes sure Ilya is watching him do it. “I think you like it.”

Oh, so. That's what this is. Or it started as one thing, and Shane is making it another. This may be the first time he's beaten Ilya at his own game. Ilya takes his time dragging his gaze from Shane's lips back up to his dark, glossy eyes. He should kiss Shane right here, in the shadow of the back of the club, shock the tiny self-satisfied smile off his face.

Ilya leans forward, just so, lets his hand slide over the curve of Shane's thigh, inch just closer to the heat waiting on the other side of that crest of muscle.

“Who taught you to say these things?”

Shane's eyes dart down to Ilya's mouth, narrow, flicker back up. “Who do you think?”

Ilya smiles, half-hard just from two seconds of Shane being mean to him. He sips his drink, even though he wants nothing to do with the cranberries. It gives Shane something to stare at. He wants to grab Shane's hand and show him exactly what Shane does to him, then maybe take him to the bathroom and ask him to demonstrate what else Ilya has taught him.

“I don't remember. Maybe you have other man you act like this for?”

“Asshole.”

“Well? Do you?” Ilya squeezes into Shane's thigh.

Shane's face is so pretty and soft when he says, “No.”

“Only me.”

Shane nods.

“Say it, Shane.”

“Only you.”

Ilya smiles wide, all his teeth on display. “Good boy.”

Shane drinks the rest of his drink.

Sasha returns with a hostess, who presents a bottle of beautiful Russian vodka chilling in a metal bucket, and a second vodka cranberry for Shane, who incriminates himself fully by getting back out of his seat and sitting across the table from Ilya again. Ilya flexes the hand that was just touching Shane, lets it fall into his own lap.

The hostess pours up three glasses in front of them, sets the bottle on the table. Sasha slides into the booth where Shane had been, sliding one of the glasses to Ilya, one to Shane, one to himself. Shane nods, and glances forlornly at his fruit juice cocktail, before taking a sip of the vodka straight, his face screwing into a momentary grimace.

Sasha takes a smooth sip of his drink, gestures, says, «So? Introduce us.»

In English, Ilya says, “Shane, this is Sasha.”

Shane is stiff, though his eyes are glassy and his face flushed. “Hi.”

“Hi Shane,” Sasha purrs, his accent thick like honey around the words. “I am old friend of Ilya. Sorry. My English is, ah... do you speak Russian?”

“No, uh, sorry,” Shane says.

Sasha smiles. “*Et le français?*”

Shane gives Sasha a huge, undeserved, adorable smile, so excited to have something to show off. “*Bah oui, bien sûr.*”

Sasha laughs and says some stupid shit that Ilya doesn’t understand, but knows Sasha well enough to know that much.

«You can leave now, Sasha,» he mutters.

Sasha turns to him, delighted. «Excuse me, Ilyushka, I am talking to my new friend, Shane.»

Sasha pulls out of the booth with Ilya and crosses over to Shane, slides in beside him instead. His fingers trace condensation across the table as he starts chatting to him in French. The obnoxious grin on his face is meant for Ilya, because it is naturally very funny that Sasha can speak to Shane in a language Ilya doesn’t understand, right in front of him, because Sasha has clearly already clocked that Ilya is fucking him, and that Shane is too oblivious and too polite to notice. How long, Ilya wonders, before Sasha starts offering him tips on fellatio, just to see the face he makes? Or maybe Ilya is being insane and jealous and has absolutely no reason to act this way other than his own stupid obstinance that brought them here in the first place.

Ilya could tell Sasha to fuck off, and he would, with a laugh. But he doesn’t. He kind of wants Shane to do it, instead, but Shane never would. Even if this was the worst experience

of his life, Shane would probably just bear down and take it, just because Ilya has made it into some kind of challenge for him to endure. Which strikes Ilya as kind of charming, kind of romantic, kind of what he loves so fucking much about this dumb fucking man in the first place.

But actually, Shane doesn't seem like he's enduring much at all. He and Sasha seem like they're having a good time, hands above the table, Shane back to sipping his pink drink and smiling around the edge of the glass like a little fucking cocktease. Ilya can actually sit here and just watch him *talk to someone* and get a little pathetically hard from it.

He wonders what Shane is willing to say in French that he might not say in English. What he might be willing to say, drunk, to a stranger. Is he crafting some unconvincing story about how he and Ilya are *friends*? Is he telling him the truth? Are they comparing war stories about him?

Ilya tips his glass back and clears the rest of the vodka, lets it slide easily down. "I'll be right back," he says to Shane.

"Oh?" Shane says, watching Ilya rise from the table.

"Bathroom." He nods to the glass in Shane's hand. "Finish your drink."

Music engulfs Ilya as he makes his way across the dance floor, the lights brighter and the smoke thicker and the bass deeper here than back in VIP. There are bodies everywhere, dancing, sliding against him as he passes through.

Credit to Sasha, he thinks, the bathrooms are clean. They used to complain to each other about the state of the toilets in some of the shitty clubs they visited together, the stench, the dampness under their shoes. They were there to fuck or get high or both, and sometimes the room was so disgusting that it became an exercise in mind over matter to get in the mood for either. Sasha has certainly learned from all of the debauchery they put themselves through.

Ilya pisses, shakes himself off. He goes to the sink to run his hands under the water, shakes them to dry. He squares back his shoulders and makes to leave the bathroom when the door opens and there is Sasha, already pulling a little bag of coke from his pocket. He smiles crookedly at Ilya and shakes it in his face.

Ilya finds himself, again, remembering being fourteen, fucking around with Sasha and Sveta, sneaking out to meet them in the park and get high and drunk and fuck their way into Moscow nightclubs they had no business being in. It was fun to be so young and stupid, to not care about anything, least of all himself.

But Ilya is different now. He's shifted, like a glacier, by centimeters and minute degrees until he's become slowly unrecognizable. He doesn't want the jittery aggrandisement of the coke or the dark slow satisfaction of the vodka, or the quick cardiac shock of Sasha's mouth or his ass in this gaudy overloud club. Shane has pulled him in some other direction, made him something else, and now, when he looks at Sasha, all he sees are all the ways he himself has changed.

Funny, he thought once upon a time that the fun was all in debauching Shane, but it's somehow the other way around. Ilya is the one doing things he never saw himself doing.

«No, thanks, Sasha.»

«No, I figured you wouldn't want to, since you are so boring now.» Sasha dips a long pinky finger into the packet, brings it to his nose. Whatever gets left behind after one hard inhale gets ground into the back of his gums. He turns his pinpoint gaze on Ilya and says, «I can see why you're in love with him. He's hot and very boring, too. A Canadian, Ilyushka, *really*?»

«Sasha...»

«I'm fucking with you, of course. But I also can't believe you came to my club and flaunted your beautiful boyfriend in front of me like this. Unless it's an invitation, it's very rude.»

«No invitation,» Ilya says. «Sorry.»

Sasha shrugs one lanky shoulder. «I wouldn't share him, either. He might figure out you aren't all that good in bed.»

Ilya grins. «Fuck you.»

«He said you've known each other for years.» Sasha seems to come to a sudden realization. «Is this why you blew me off at Sochi?»

Ilya sees no reason to lie to Sasha now. «Yes.»

Sasha's gaze softens, like what Ilya has just admitted has knocked Sasha into a wounded sort of affection for him.

«Oh, Ilyushka. Does Sveta know?»

«No. It's not just my secret to tell.»

«My fucking god, you really are in love. I'm disgusted.» Sasha presses a kiss to Ilya's cheek, then pats it with his big hand. «It was good to see you tonight. Take care of yourself.» And then he's out the door, leaving Ilya alone.

He gives himself a minute, fussing with his hair, fussing with it again, then he leaves in search of Shane.

He finds him at the bar, somehow holding an empty glass again. He is, at least, still standing under his own power, and trying to hold a shouted conversation in French with the bartender. She has dark hair and prominent tattoos, and looks like the kind of person that Shane might be scared of in the light of day, but he is loose and laughing with her after a couple of overly strong vodka cranberries.

Ilya moves up beside him, puts a hand on his lower back, digs fingers into the sweat dampening Shane's tee shirt there. "Stop flirting, unless you want me to fuck you," he mutters over Shane's shoulder.

“Shut up, *Ilya*,” Shane says, turning big brown glassy eyes to him. “You’re going to do that anyway.”

Ilya smiles. “Yes.”

Shane is drunk. Can’t hold his liquor, good Canadian boy that he is. He moves closer to Ilya, close but not close beyond reproach. The bartender slides another pink-tinged drink to him and wanders politely off.

“Maybe you should take it easy,” Ilya says. “You might pass out, and then I won’t be able to fuck you tonight, and I will be so sad.”

“Fuck off,” Shane says, but he takes a tiny sip of his drink instead of the long drags from before. “Sasha seems nice,” he says, glancing sideways at Ilya, his entire head going along with it.

“Yes, he’s very nice.”

“He offered me cocaine,” Shane says, laughs, *hiccups*. Ilya is going to make it so he can’t even walk tomorrow. “I said no thanks.”

“Good boy,” Ilya says, because he can’t help himself.

“Do you do stuff like that?” Shane asks suddenly.

Ilya shrugs, makes it a gesture of stretching out his shoulders. “Not during the season.”

“So, you do.”

“In the summer, in Russia. Sometimes.”

“In *Russia*?” Shane shakes his head. “Isn’t that, like, a problem in Russia? If you got caught with drugs?”

“It is the other things Sasha offers that are a problem in Russia.”

Shane doesn’t understand. He puts his little eyebrows together and thinks really hard, and comes away confused. “Like what?”

Ilya looks at him, up, down. “What do you think?”

“Oh. Like, being gay?”

“Yes. Is considered, ah, promotion of homosexuality. It is a crime. That is why Sasha lives in Paris, and Svetlana and I live in the US.”

Shane’s eyes are going very soft and very sad. It’s enough. Ilya got what he wanted. He’s proven whatever stupid thing he needed to prove to himself, about Rose Landry, who doesn’t even matter, about Shane, who is the only one who matters. He doesn’t want to see Shane like this again, big brown eyes gazing at him under gaudy club lights, miserable.

“Let’s go home, Shane.”

He throws an arm around Shane’s neck in the Uber. Shane allows it, or the vodka he drank allows it, and he’s warm and solid against Ilya’s chest, tiny pants of his damp breath blossoming along Ilya’s neck.

“She was hot,” Shane says, out of nowhere. “Right? The bartender?”

“What is this? Trick question?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever found a woman hot in my life,” Shane laughs. “Fuck. I’m, like, *really* gay.”

Ilya lets his mouth drift over the damp skin along Shane’s forehead, absently pressing his lips to it.

“No, she wasn’t hot,” Ilya says.

“You’re such a liar,” Shane laughs.

“It doesn’t matter if she’s hot,” Ilya says, wondering when he’s going to understand just what the fuck Shane is getting at.

“It would be so much easier for you if you didn’t do this,” Shane says finally, murmuring it into the cave of Ilya’s shoulder and collarbone. “You could, like, find a girl to be with.”

“Yes, but. Problem is, *you* are not a girl.” Ilya runs his fingers through Shane’s short hair, as if to reiterate.

“Yeah, I know.”

Shane is too drunk to go entirely to that clipped, tight place with his voice, but he sounds like he’s closing in on himself. Ilya turns his head, presses another kiss to the soft skin at Shane’s temple that offers itself to him. Rests his mouth there, so his next words are slightly muffled against Shane’s face.

“And I met you too young, you see. You were too sweet, too pretty. Your mouth was too good.”

He can hear Shane’s wet laugh, feels it breathed out against him. Over Shane’s head, Paris passes beyond the car window, people spill out of bars and clubs and lights flash and music dopplers through his ears, but Ilya is thinking only of soft, wanting eyes in a hotel gym, wet, shining skin in a locker room shower, freckles burning over cold cheeks in a Regina parking lot. When he returned to Russia, eighteen years old and already done for, he would look up at the dim stars on clear, cold nights and think of them.

“You ruined me for anyone else, after. I only was thinking of you. There is no girl. There cannot be. It’s just you.”

Shane makes a wounded noise and Ilya knows what he will find when he moves to tilt Shane's face up, the red-rimmed, pooling eyes, the thick dark lashes that have already given Shane away with how they cling soggily together. He is so beautiful like this, the greatest irony, because Ilya could look at him sad and soft forever and still want him to never look this way again. Shane, he thinks, should always be radiant, triumphant. He deserves to have the entire world shine on him, always. Ilya's entire world. Ilya kisses the end of his nose, the fullest part of his cheek, where those freckles still torment him.

"Is very sad story. I know."

Shane sniffs, makes a play at a smile. The corners of his mouth betray him, turning down. "It doesn't sound sad at all."

Ilya strokes the ghosts of tears away from Shane's beautiful face. It's Russian that slips from his lips, then. *But you are crying, my love.*

He wraps his arms around Shane as well as the backseat will let him, and watches Paris pass over Shane's head the rest of the way home.

Chapter End Notes

Debating if I should tag this one "Slow Burn", since we're 6 chapters deep and they haven't said I love you yet, but I don't even know what counts as a slow burn in this fandom, because they've been fucking since chapter 2?? I don't know, now I'm crowdsourcing the decision by putting it in the author notes.

I'm on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](https://www.tumblr.com/scacao-blog)

Chapter 7: A garden to walk in and immensity to dream in

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane get their ice time.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.

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

Shane wakes up so late that the sun is out, bearing down into the room from the terrace doors, the curtains drawn back because they wake up in the darkness anyway, they fuck in the dark morning, what is the point?

His head hurts. It's a pinch behind his eyes and in his temples, a throb at the neck. His mouth is sticky and rough, disgusting. He doesn't remember brushing his teeth last night. His stomach is sour, acidic and churning. Ugh. Ugh.

He can't remember the last time he was ever this hungover. He's never drinking vodka again. He'll probably break Ilya's heart if he says that out loud, but no. Doesn't matter. It's a question of self-preservation.

Ilya is not in bed, and Shane can't see him on the terrace when he squints one eye open to check. He shuts it again quickly. Fuck, it's bright out there. An actual sunny day, maybe the one time Shane wishes for gloom.

Shane debates the next steps, none of which sound appealing. He could stay in bed. His head would throb and his throat would feel like sandpaper the whole time. He could get up and get some water and brush his teeth, maybe find something for his headache. That sounds daunting, too, a lot of steps, he would need to open his eyes for all of that. He'll do it. He'll do it. He just needs another minute or two.

He wants Ilya. He doesn't like the feeling of being in this big bed alone. This is the one bed where he has never slept without Ilya beside him. And now that's what he's used to.

And last night was weird. It was bad, and then it was good, really good, being held by Ilya in the Uber home, his soft deep voice. *It's just you.* Shane hadn't even really known he'd needed Ilya to tell him that, until he had asked it and the space between when Shane said it and Ilya answered him stretched into an impossibly long and terrible eternity. And then, when Ilya

whispered against his temple that what he wanted was Shane, the difficult and maybe impossible choice, but *Shane*, he had been so wrecked by raw relief that he'd cried all over Ilya like a stupid baby, but it was okay. Ilya kissed him about it, murmured in Russian. It was okay. Shane is in so much trouble, loves Ilya Rozanov too fucking much, but it's okay.

Shane forces himself up onto his forearms, gropes for his phone. It's almost ten AM. Jesus Christ. He has some more messages to ignore from back home, doesn't even want to focus on the text too hard with his eyes burning and his head throbbing in open revolt.

He presses call on Lily's number. It's almost indulgently lazy, summoning Ilya back to the room this way, but it works. He hears movement from the other room. Ilya, shirtless, black sweats, shuffles into the bedroom on bare feet, scratching at his stomach.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty."

"Ugh." Shane tosses his phone back down onto the bed. He closes his eyes and turns his face into his pillow, having gotten what he wanted. "I feel so bad."

"Yes. You are lightweight, I figured you would not feel good this morning."

Shane feels the bed shift beneath him as Ilya puts his weight on it. That's the familiar feeling, the presence at his side, the bed not so empty anymore. Big fingers comb through his hair, rub along the short buzzed edges at his neck, the first thing that has felt good this morning. Shane makes a happy little noise. Ilya puts something cold down by Shane's burning temple, a bottle of water from the fridge.

That is actually what gets Shane to scramble up from where he's splayed out on the bed, pull himself to sit despite his headache and his churning stomach. He drinks half the bottle down, feels fifty percent better just from that, be it placebo or whatever. It doesn't matter.

"Okay, I'm okay."

"Yes? You can stay here, we don't have anywhere to be."

Shane takes another huge swallow, lets it travel refreshingly cold through him. "It's nice out, though. It's a waste."

Ilya smiles. He looks perfectly fine, eyes clear and hair combed and it's also kind of a waste that he looks fucking hot, because Shane doesn't think he could get anything going right now, thinks he might actually throw up if he tries. Maybe later, when he's downed enough water and showered and gotten something in his stomach.

"Mm. Is okay. You need to eat, probably. No gym today, so you can have something. I will go get something from *viennoiserie*?"

Shane laughs out loud, just, like, wow. Ilya learned some French. Of course it's *viennoiserie*. Priorities.

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll get ready."

“You do not have to get ready.” Ilya kisses him on the center of his clammy forehead. That also helps.

But Shane does, eventually, get out of bed, once Ilya has thrown on some clothes and left. He showers, lets the water hit the back of his head until the bad throb is just a throb and then a nicer, warmer pulse instead, like massaging a knot of muscle until it’s released. He brushes his teeth slowly and deliberately, because his gag reflex feels ready to betray him at any second this morning. When Ilya returns, holding two paper bags seeping through with butter, Shane is dressed and downing his second bottle of Evian, and is feeling good enough that choosing to spend the day in the unexpected sunlight, and not hiding from it, seems like a good idea.

“Ilya, it’s so much,” Shane says, watching Ilya arrange a pile of croissants and *pains au chocolat* and *kouign-amann* into a tower on a plate between them on the kitchen counter.

“No, no, you need bread. Good for your stomach. It will soak up the alcohol.” Ilya tears into a croissant, as if to demonstrate. He gestures with the plate to Shane and Shane doesn’t have to be convinced that hard. The first bite of chocolate ganache and buttery dough of the *pain au chocolat* is so good that he feels most of the way better, like a blood sugar spike is the only thing he needed to get through. Ilya’s face lights up watching him eat, a little too much, probably. There’s some enjoyment of Shane doing something he knows is bad for himself under Ilya’s ministrations. Whatever, Shane thinks, reaching for a croissant. Maybe he likes it, too.

After, he feels good enough to suggest to Ilya that they go for a run.

“You will regret this, I think,” Ilya says.

“I will definitely lap you,” Shane says, and Ilya kisses him for real for the first time that morning.

They do end up wandering outside in running gear, when the sun is at its highest point in the short day, and the street is packed with people smoking and drinking coffee and eating lunch. They head to the giant green expanse west of the apartment on Shane’s GPS, labeled *Bois de Boulogne*, then race each other around the park until Shane does feel like he may be on the verge of revisiting the croissants from the morning, has to hunch over with his hands on his knees and breathe deeply until the emergency passes and his stomach settles.

They wander into a muddy, narrow trail between close, barren trees, and Ilya pulls him behind the obstructing girth of a thick oak tree and kisses him hard, tasting like sweat and salt, his tongue cold from the water they are sharing between them. Shane runs his hands beneath Ilya’s damp shirt and it’s so good, heart wild and pulse still high from the run and Ilya all around him, no one to find them, no one to see. Oh my god, Shane loves him.

They take their time on the way back, enjoying the view alongside what seems like half of Paris, like everyone has stopped what they are doing and come outside to enjoy the unexpected sun. There are people sitting by the man-made lakes and walking their dogs and stretching out on blankets in the grass, pulling food out of bags. There are couples lying intertwined on the lawns or leaning on each other on park benches, or just walking hand in

hand. Ilya points out every dog they pass, all sweet boys and girls, all beautiful and wonderful and probably every synonym Ilya knows.

“You sound like you’re going to steal them,” Shane says, after Ilya stops them in the path of another little white fluffy thing and lets it leap up on his calves and manically nuzzle into his big hands, probably leaves them wet and smelling like dog.

“I would. Buy me a puppy, Shane, *please*.”

Shane wants to kiss Ilya here, in front of all these people, who probably don’t care, probably wouldn’t know a thing. Shane wants to reach for Ilya’s hand and hold it while they walk back to the apartment. He wants Ilya to turn to him and pull Shane’s hand from his pocket and lace their fingers together and take the choice away from him entirely. But Ilya doesn’t, and Shane doesn’t, and they just walk.

They turn a corner and come upon a wedding party taking photos in the privacy afforded by two rows of hedges. The bride is in a long, flowing white dress, the groom in a sharp black suit. The photographer has them holding hands, turned away from each other, looking back over their shoulders, smiling and gazing at one another. She stops, snaps a picture, then walks further away, and takes another from a different vantage point. She will hurry back to them, move something just so, tilt them to face each other, tilt them away. They hold hands the entire time. They look at each other the entire time. The bride keeps laughing, and has to work her face into something more serious when the photographer lifts the camera to her eyeline.

It’s nice. It’s a nice place to take photos, a nice place to get married. Paris is probably one of those places that couples save for years to get married in. There are probably couples here every day, rain or shine, taking the same photos. Looking at each other the same way.

Shane doesn’t know why it makes his breath catch and his chest feel tight. It’s stupid, to make every fucking thing about him, about him and Ilya, about them. It’s just a wedding. Shane doesn’t even know if he wants to get married, or whatever. He used to think he probably would, someday, when he found the girl who would finally inspire him to be normal, to forget about dick. Which sounds insane now, that he thought that would work at all. At least he isn’t in denial anymore, but the entire concept sounds like it belongs to other people, not to him. Because there is only one person he can imagine when he thinks of the word *wedding*, the word *married*, and they can’t. They can’t. So what is he getting upset for?

Does Ilya think about this? Shane can’t possibly ask that. It would be crazy. He wishes he doesn’t immediately want to know.

Ilya puts his hand on the small of Shane’s back, and Shane wishes again that he could just take it in his own, pull Ilya close. Touch him in some declarative, possessive way, out in the open. It would be so fucking crazy, but maybe it would be okay here. Maybe no one would even look their way.

He doesn’t. They duck out of the park when the clouds eventually roll back in, turning the day windy and cold and grey again.

Svetlana texts Ilya early Tuesday morning with an address. When Ilya goes to open it, he finds it's for a luxury car rental service for Russian expats in France. Of course they would have something like this. Of course Sveta would know about it. There are connections she has that Ilya doesn't ask about, even when they work to his advantage like this. Hockey stars in Russia can have connections like that, move in those sorts of networks. A hockey star in America having those connections would be a national news story and he would be swiftly sent packing. So he just doesn't ask, and he doesn't go looking to Sveta for too many favors, too often. Doesn't ask her for anything too big, doesn't ask for anything unless he really needs it.

Sveta has sent him a picture of a sleek coupe painted a luxe anthracite grey, gleaming like a shark under fluorescent dealership lighting.

[Sveta]

Porsche 911 Carrera GTS

«Best I could do on short notice))»

Ilya squints at the screen, types with his eyes half-lidded.

[Ilya]

«You're an angel»

[Sveta]

«It's per diem, just return when you are bored»

«I know ;)»

«Don't forget the video!!»

Shane wants to leave right away for the rink; it's an hour drive, he's fresh right now, he knows it's going to take a while to get set up once they get there. Ilya tries to pull him into the shower, but he pushes him away with enough force that Ilya knows there won't be any success. Even here, in their little European oasis, hockey is Shane Hollander's priority.

The look on Shane's face when he sees the Carrera is worth whatever markup Ilya will be charged for the per diem.

“Are you even allowed to drive in France?” he says as they are buckling themselves in. Sometimes Shane thinks Ilya is so stupid. It really should piss him off more, Ilya thinks. Maybe it would, if Ilya didn't get to fuck Shane stupid right back.

“I have Russian driver's license,” he says, as if it matters. Like anyone even glanced at it when they were at the agency. Boris had handed him the keys and told him, with true

sincerity, that Ilya had been robbed in Sochi. Ilya could have shown up wasted and probably still been allowed to drive off.

“Show me,” Shane says. Ilya dutifully pulls his wallet out of his pocket and hands it over to Shane.

“It’s in the center pocket.”

Shane’s eyes go gleefully wide as he looks at it.

“Oh my god, you’re a baby.” He looks at Ilya, practically giggling. “How old are you in this photo?”

“Eighteen. I got it same year I left Russia.”

He reaches across the center console, slips his hand across Shane’s thigh. If Shane is going to be this adorable, Ilya is going to do something about it. He squeezes the muscle, testing if Shane will allow more. They’re in a nice car together, after all, the setting for quite a few of Ilya’s fantasies involving Shane he never thought he’d get a chance to act out. Boris will probably be nice and waive the cleaning fee if Ilya autographs something.

“Hey, hey, cut it out,” Shane says, peeling Ilya’s hand off his thigh. “We are going to be late for the reservation.”

“Ah, yes, reservation which we have for all day. Cannot be late.”

“This is because I didn’t want to give you head in the shower this morning, isn’t it?”

“No. Is okay. You will make it up to me later.”

Ilya throws the car into drive and peels out of the parking spot. The 911 purrs to life and lurches them pleasantly forward. Shane gives him a look, like he doesn’t trust him not to kill them both. They exit up a blindingly steep ramp out of the garage and are deposited onto a narrow side street, with no indication of its name or orientation in the city. Thank god for CarPlay and Maps, Ilya thinks.

Ilya relaxes into the driver’s seat as he gets used to how the car handles. He’s not usually a Porsche guy— nothing against them, he just prefers Italian. But this one is fun, even as they crawl in the Paris traffic on their way out of the city. Maybe he’ll look into one when he gets back, if he likes this joy ride enough.

Shane really starts to get annoying about Ilya’s driving on the *périphérique*, and then on the highway as they travel east of the city. He wraps his hand around the door handle like Ilya is preparing to blast them off into space. Ilya feels like he’s driving someone’s grandma.

“Hollander, you cannot be serious.”

“What? I’m fine.”

“You look like, what is the word? Struck?”

“...Stricken?”

“Yes. Like you have seen a ghost.”

“Ilya, you drive like an insane person.”

“I am very safe driver. I am not even going very fast. I could be going much faster.”

“Ugh.” Shane retreats further into his seat, lightly green. “How many speeding tickets have you gotten in Boston?”

“You are kidding. You think they will give me a speeding ticket in fucking Boston? I won first Stanley Cup in sixteen years for this city. They will name highway after me.”

“Oh my god.” Shane tightens his grip, closes his eyes, like he can’t bear to watch. Just to be an ass, Ilya accelerates to two-hundred km/h on the flat stretch of highway ahead of them. “*Ilya!* Jesus Christ.”

“Shane, I am just trying to make it to reservation in time.”

“You’re *such* an asshole.”

They make it to the reservation with ten minutes to spare. Shane ought to be proud of him, Ilya thinks, that he could be so punctual.

Svetlana told him that someone named Étienne would meet them at the doors, but Ilya had assumed that was a woman’s name. He is surprised to find a tall, dark-haired man with a trimmed beard and smart athletic clothes waiting outside when he draws into the parking lot.

“Hello!” the man says, helpfully in English, as Ilya and Shane pile out of the car, Shane leaning back on the door and taking a few steadying breaths first. Ah, but he gets mad when Ilya calls him dramatic. “Welcome to the Olympic Club, Mr. Rozanov and Mr. Hollander!”

“Just Ilya is okay,” he says.

Shane nods, sticks out his hand. “Yeah, please call me Shane.”

Ilya can tell, as Étienne leads them around on his brief facility tour, that he knows who they are, might actually be the biggest MLH fan in France. He seems starstruck to have two captains in his presence, using his rink.

“Your, um— agent?— asked for us to prepare some practice gear for you.”

Ilya smiles. He actually did ask Svetlana to be his agent, once, but she turned him down. *We would kill each other, Ilyusha*. Then she ends up doing things like this for him, anyway.

Étienne leads them to a locker room, more or less what Ilya expects from any locker room at a hockey rink, and there is gear laid out for them already, skates, equipment, all blue and red, maybe the property of a local team that plays here. Someone has really gone the extra mile and fashioned matching jerseys for them: *Rozanov 81* and *Hollander 24*, red fabric, blue

lettering. Étienne is standing politely to the side and smiling intently, so maybe this was his doing.

“Thank you so much for this,” Shane says.

“Oh, no, it’s an honor, actually,” Étienne says, clearly thrilled.

He leaves them be to change, which Ilya appreciates, because it allows him to slide his hands around Shane’s waist when he’s half-dressed and press into him from behind, obstructed from much more by all the padding on their legs, but it still gets him a little hard from the wish fulfillment alone.

“Ilya.”

“I have always wanted to do this,” Ilya says, kissing behind Shane’s ear. “What, you didn’t?”

Shane laughs. “What do you think? We’re always sexting before games. It’s given me a complex or something.”

“Mm, good. I want you to have complex for this.” He gropes down the front of Shane’s compression shorts, even though all he feels is plastic, but Shane gives him a little hum anyway.

They do eventually get fully geared up, sitting beside each other on the bench. Shane puts his skates on one at a time, lacing one fully and then the other. Ilya smiles at it, at learning that this is how Shane does it. Shane has probably laced up his skates a million times in his life, and Ilya didn’t even know how he did it until today. He’s seen into some other little part of Shane that was closed off to Ilya before. Another gift from Paris. Another thing to hold onto, hold close.

“Same team, today,” Shane says, knocking Ilya’s padded knee with his own.

“Yes. I will be taking home this jersey, I think.”

“Me too.”

Ilya looks at their matching gloves, matching helmets. It would be so nice. Another version of this life, maybe, where anyone could afford them both. Things would have been so different, probably, if they could have always been known as friends. If they were always in each other’s proximity, the same city, the same locker room. It almost hurts to imagine, to long for some other, easier version of this.

“This is nice,” Shane says. He’s looking at where their knees are touching, red to red.

“Yes, it is.” Ilya has a sudden idea. “We should take picture.”

He gropes around the top shelf of the locker for his phone, trains the selfie camera on the two of them. In the viewport, Shane just looks at Ilya and smiles. So Ilya turns to him, tilts his head just so, and presses the button just as he puts his lips to Shane’s. Perfect. Ilya shows Shane the result, grinning.

Shane is laughing even as he's shaking his head. "You have to delete that."

"Yes. Later."

"Let's do a normal one."

So they do, smiling, close enough for both their faces in the shot, not too close to give anything away. Like teammates. Like friends.

Étienne returns eventually, guides them to the rink, fresh ice, equipment all waiting for them, sticks leaning on the boards, a collection of pucks piled at center ice. He stands to the side while they jump the boards and eventually pulls out a small camera of his own.

"If you do not mind," he says. "This is a really exciting day for us."

So they pose for a picture, Ilya's arm around Shane's shoulders, Shane smiling politely, Ilya grinning wide. He wonders where this one will end up posted. He wonders if he can ask for a copy.

"Okay, I don't want to bother you any further," Étienne says, and he leaves them to it.

The first thing Ilya does is jerry-rig a stand for his phone, props it up on the railing with a puck to balance on.

"You're gonna record?" Shane says. "I didn't know you were taking this so seriously."

"Please, Hollander, I know you are going to take this too seriously. No, is for Svetlana. She asked to see us practice."

He fiddles with the zoom until he can see about all he can see with the limits of his phone camera, presses *record*, gives it a wave.

"She likes to see you play?" Shane says. He's hovering around, watching Ilya adjust the aperture, looking serious, like he wants to give unsolicited advice.

"Ah, no, she has seen enough of me play, probably. I think I told you before that she is big fan of yours. She wants to see us play together. I think she thinks you are better hockey player than me. And more handsome." Ilya blows a raspberry. "Terrible taste, obviously." He skates to center ice, Shane following.

They come up with stupid rules to make it fun. No goalie, so the only goals that count are at the posts and along the crossbar, like they're playing Peewee leagues again. No shots from within the crease. Obviously.

"I'm going to beat you," Shane says. Always a competition, even fucking around like this. Ilya wishes he wasn't already recording, so he could kiss Shane for it. He's just so fucking stupid, so fucking cute.

"First to ten?" Ilya says.

“Sure.”

Ilya turns his back to the phone, skates close to Shane. “I get to fuck you in the Porsche, if I win,” he says, too low for the video to pick up.

“No, Ilya, come on.”

Ilya just raises his eyebrows. “Oh? You better win, then.”

Shane smiles, beautiful, and hits one of the center-ice pucks hard down the line, dumps it in the defensive zone at one end, and both of them are off, flying down the ice to catch it. Shane gets to it first, races it around the back of the net, lines it up to shoot, but Ilya checks him into the boards before he can score on him too quickly, first contact, the first kiss of their bodies against each other. Ilya breathes in the punched-out *oof* of Shane getting the wind knocked out of him.

The puck slides away, and Ilya is the one who can retrieve it first, snakes it with an outstretched stick, switches feet when Shane is there— already, fucking so fast always— and just manages to keep it away again, though it’s nearly a miracle. But Ilya excels at connecting miracles together to make goals, and that’s exactly what he does, shoots right at the edge of the crease and dings it clean off the crossbar. 1-0. He’s going to make Boris cry, he’ll be cleaning Ilya’s reward out of the seams in the leather for days.

Ilya laughs and Shane looks legitimately pissed off, which Ilya just finds as hot as he does in actual games. The puck has whizzed away after connecting with the pipe and Shane does not waste time, goes flying for it, trying to score at the other end of the ice, and Ilya means to skate into his path and poke the puck from out of Shane’s stick, convert that into goal number two, but Shane whips it through his legs and it lands smack against one of the posts and it’s already 1-1, and Shane is so proud of himself. He skates up to Ilya and gives him a hard little shove, and laughs in his face.

“Fucking watch me, Rozanov,” he says, exhilarated, breathless. And then, he’s gone again, and Ilya is after him.

They fly across the ice like that, no breaks, no shifts, just the two of them fighting for almost no stakes, just Ilya’s perverse desire to fuck up a nice car with Shane’s cum on the upholstery, but the stakes are always there, innately within them. This is their natural state, maybe. They either must be fucking or they must be fighting like dogs on the ice. Of course they weren’t going to end up practicing fucking passes, they were always going to end up like this. Sorry, Svetlana, Ilya thinks. She’s just going to get more of the Hollander vs Rozanov highlight reel, a private show.

And even as Ilya’s overtaking Hollander and losing him again and sinking a puck just wide of the post and then blocking one of Shane’s shots and then scoring and then being scored against, he’s watching Shane, watching his beautiful body move with such grace and speed and sudden bursts of brutal aggression— Shane checks hard as a motherfucker, honestly. They give him the good guy title because he’s polite off the ice, but he’s just as much of a freight train as Ilya, he bowls players over twice his size no problem. Ilya has been called a barracuda by the press and the fans, sometimes a great white. If that’s the case, Shane is a

killer whale, or a hammerhead. Another apex predator, like him. Maybe the only one like him.

God, he is so fucking beautiful. Ilya watches him slice across the rink and chop it in half; this is his world, their world, only theirs. It's always been only theirs, only them, Shane and Ilya, Ilya and Shane. There is no one else who can catch them. Would Ilya even be this good, in a world without Shane Hollander? Would he have even bothered to be? Shane never gave him the choice, breathing down his neck ever since he got drafted number two and took it like a personal indictment. Ilya is the best because he gets to live in Shane's world, and without Shane Hollander, there would be no Ilya Rozanov. Even here, in this empty rink, no one else to see, he can see it. The hockey is part of them both and part of the sex and part of the heartbreak, maybe most of it. But it's also the thing they were both put on earth to do, better than anyone else, chase each other to the top until no one can reach them, and Ilya suddenly feels terribly, incredibly lucky to know Shane, his equal and his opposite and his beating heart and his wildest desire.

2-2. 3-2. 4-2. 4-3. 4-4. Shane is keeping track. Ilya has long since stopped paying attention. He moves on muscle memory, the great white locked on the scent of Shane's competition. Shane flies and weaves and darts around him, checks him again, he checks back, and it feels as good as sinking into his body, as good as when Shane is angry and hot and a little ashamed by how much he wants Ilya, how he can make orgasms just as competitive as this, how he can't do anything by half. Shane can't help himself, because he is the best, because Ilya is the best, and they've made each other this way.

He loves Shane like this, almost feral with the need to be so good, better than, the best ever, all for Ilya. He loves him when he's half-crazed, seeing only victory, when he turns in the chase and looks back to Ilya with sparking flint for eyes, his smile wild. Ilya brings it out of him, everywhere, and Shane draws it out of Ilya too. Makes him play like his life depends on it, makes him fuck harder and better, makes him fucking work for it all, because Shane deserves it. Because. Because. Because Ilya loves him so fucking much and has never loved like this before and will never love like this again.

It starts to simmer in Ilya's body then, starts to thrum along his skin and whisper in his veins like his blood is starting to steam and pop and boil with it: *I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you.* He feels it behind his teeth as he tries to wrestle the last two points away from Shane, the words weighing on his tongue, on the verge of spilling out.

Shane scoops the puck away from him, whips it off the crossbar, 9-8. Ilya chases, chases, makes Shane ricochet off the boards once more and shoots in the momentary absence— goes wide, sinks it in the basket. Shane flies from behind him back to center, lifts up one of the remaining pucks and bears down on Ilya like a missile, eyes hard, smile bitten down, and Ilya already knows Shane's won before it even happens. Shane curls around him, makes Ilya's body just another obstacle, moves like the stick is an extension of his arm or his brain or his soul, and sends a bullet to the right-hand post, a perfect shot, 10-8, game over.

Ilya skates to center ice, rips off his helmet. His hair is wet and plastered to his forehead, his breath short and hot, and his heart wants to beat clear out of his chest and feels like it's pressing up into his throat. If he opens his mouth, he's going to say it, can't keep it inside any

longer, bursting out of him of its own volition. Even if saying it out loud is the worst fucking idea in the world, naming this *thing* between them that has taken over their lives and imbued every part of it with incredible joy and inescapable sadness. Even if. He can't say anything else, he can't open his mouth and have anything else come out, not words, not breath. He can't draw air into his lungs, unless he says it right now.

"Let's fucking go!" Shane cries, circling around the net, doesn't have to pretend not to gloat when it's just Ilya here, doesn't have to be anyone's good sport. "Fucking told you, Rozanov. Fuck yes!"

"I love you," Ilya says.

"Huh? What did you say?" Shane thinks he's chirping, probably only hearing the blood roaring in his own ears. He skates closer, his gleaming smile wide, high off the win. No stakes, all the stakes. There are never zero stakes between them.

Ilya's throat burns and his eyes burn and he takes a big breath and lets it out and his heart is twisted just as tightly after, so he says it again, he has to.

"I love you."

Shane's eyes go wide beneath his visor and his smile falls away so suddenly that Ilya, for a moment, thinks he's made a mistake, despite everything, despite Paris.

Then Shane skates into him hard, his helmet connecting with the padding across Ilya's chest. Heavy arms come up around him, encumbered by all their collective gear. They stand like that for a moment, like a freeze-frame of a celly, and Ilya sheds his gloves and puts his arms around Shane's giant shoulders and waits.

Shane's voice is thin and quiet, muffled against Ilya's jersey. "Why the fuck would you say that here, you asshole?"

Carefully, Ilya lifts Shane's head, sliding off his helmet and tossing it away. Shane is damp with sweat and blinking hard and Ilya cradles his face and runs his thumbs against the flush on the high points of his jutting cheekbones.

"Shane."

"Me too," Shane says. "I love you too. I love you so much, Ilya, I—"

Ilya kisses him then, square on center ice, like maybe he has wanted to do forever, since rookie season, since the first time he lined up along the dot and it was Shane's beautiful face across from him. It's an image from his wildest dreams, a desire too impossible to truly even wish for. But here, somehow, hockey and Shane and Ilya are allowed to all coexist, to find their equilibrium. So Ilya takes the gift that's been presented to him, and tastes salt and sweat and Shane's hot, ragged breath and finds all the spaces in Shane's mouth that shaped the words *I* and *love* and *you*, catalogues them, tongue, teeth, lips. The lights are cold and bright and there is the humid breeze of ice around them and Ilya memorizes that too, how it feels right here, kissing Shane in the center of their world.

Shane takes a shuddering breath when Ilya pulls away, presses their foreheads together. “Take me home right now.”

It’s a blur, after, the speed at which they make their exit. They pull their street clothes back on without even showering at the rink, who fucking cares, anyway. Étienne mercifully does not make them autograph anything, just shakes their hands about fifteen times apiece and welcomes them back as long as they are staying in Paris. Ilya has no idea what he says to him on their way out, probably nonsense, follows Shane mutely to the parking lot, feeling almost out of body, hearing Shane’s voice saying *I love you* over and over. The desire to touch Shane is so overwhelming he almost fumbles with the car keys.

Shane folds the jerseys neatly into the trunk, for no reason, they are drenched in sweat and going straight to the laundry service. He slides back into the passenger seat, gives Ilya a look as they both buckle in.

“Don’t kill us on the way, okay?” he says, “but you better drive fucking fast.”

Ilya laughs like he might go crazy, surely in no state to drive at all, but oh well. “Okay.”

Ilya breaks probably every local speed limit to get back to the apartment, doesn’t check too closely if he parks in a legal spot or not, generally fed up with the concept of traffic laws and parking ordinances in general, or any obstacle between him and Shane and their bodies crashing back into each other.

The minute they are on the other side of the apartment door, he wraps himself around Shane, buries his head in Shane’s damp neck, lets the dark cocoon of Shane’s shoulder and his collarbone cradle him. He is suddenly too overwhelmed to know what to do next, wanting it all at once. All of Shane. Ilya wants to take Shane here in the hallway and stretch Shane out across the couch and fall into bed on top of him and pull Shane into his lap and fuck his mouth in the shower. He wants it all equally badly, and can’t decide, and just presses harder into him, until Shane says, “Shower,” and then that is what Ilya wants, too.

Shane leads them to the bathroom, runs the water, starts peeling Ilya’s clothes off his body—his sweater, his pants, dragging down his boxers to pool on the floor. Ilya kisses him, runs hands under Shane’s shirt, which interferes with Shane’s clumsy attempt to remove it, and Shane laughs and breaks away, shrugging out of his clothes, letting them crumple, wrinkled, at their feet, mixing together with Ilya’s.

Ilya kisses him everywhere under the shower spray, like he’s never had him before, like he’s tasting him for the first time. Here, the jut of his collarbone, the dip under his Adam’s apple. Here, his dusky nipples, so pliant under Ilya’s tongue, hardening up obediently for him. Ilya keeps a hand on Shane’s tit and squeezes in hard as he sinks down, drops to his knees, kisses his abs and his belly button and the furrow of dark hair resting above his pink, bobbing dick. He wraps his hand around it, strokes it like an afterthought while he kisses and kisses, until Shane is pulling at the roots of his hair and his dick is leaking over Ilya’s fingers and only then does he wrap his mouth around it and take it to the back of his throat, makes Shane come for the first time like that, Ilya’s hand still squeezing over Shane’s heart.

He lays Shane down on the bed, after they are clean and smell like the same soap, the same shampoo, like they are sharing the same skin, the same body. Ilya wants that. He wants to be so connected to Shane, so deep inside him always, that they can't ever be separated.

Shane begs for him the whole time. He moans and sighs when Ilya sinks in his fingers, scissoring them apart, says *please, please* when Ilya sucks on his nipple again, when he bites into the soft skin of Shane's earlobe. *Please, Ilya, please*, when he pulls away to roll on a condom. *Please, baby, please, fuck, I need it, I need you, Ilya, please*, even when Ilya is back between his legs, lining his dick up to Shane's hole, like there is nothing Ilya can do to satisfy him, too insatiable, too needy, too desperate.

Ilya is desperate, too. He feels insane, blood rushing too hard to think. He kneels on the bed, hikes Shane's knee up over his shoulder, spreads him wide, stretches his pretty hole out with his dick, sinks into his body, the warmest, safest, loveliest place in the world. Ilya's whole world, right here. How does he get to have this? How does he deserve this? He puts his hand on Shane's abdomen, below his bellybutton, like he means to feel himself fucking into Shane from the outside, like he needs the confirmation that he's the one really inside Shane, that this is his. Shane is his, his love, his Shane, his, *his*.

He folds Shane in half, knows he can handle it, handle all of him. He tilts Shane's jaw toward him, crushes their mouths together, sloppy from the angle, but he's rewarded by Shane's mumbling pleas breathed against his mouth.

"Please, Ilya, fuck me, give it to me, all of it, please, fuck, please..."

Ilya gives him what he wants. He will probably spend the rest of his life giving Shane whatever he wants of him: his cock, his body, his heart, his soul. *Take it, take it Shane, it's for you, it's all for you. There is no me without you anymore. Please let there be no you without me, either.*

"Ilya, I love you, oh my god, Ilya..."

The line of Shane's strong jaw, working against the pleasure, blurs in Ilya's vision, his eyes going hot. Ilya's heart rattles against his rib cage, like the puck ringing against the posts, the reverb threading out along his entire body. He can't tell if he's breathing or if he's close to passing out or if he's dying, dying in the heat between Shane's legs, Ilya's chest feeling like it's collapsing when he looks at Shane, wild and beautiful and blown away underneath him.

Let it happen like this, if it has to happen. Let the volcano never stop erupting, let it cover them both with ash and soot and let them be together, always.

Shane plays with Ilya's sweat-matted hair, curls it around his fingers into strange little shapes. Ilya a steady, soothing weight on top of him, all the miles of his skin aligned with Shane's, their legs tangled. Shane almost doesn't know where he ends and Ilya begins, doesn't want to

move and bring the demarcation of their bodies into stronger relief. It should always be this way, he thinks, some part of Ilya always touching him, always in contact. He never wants to feel space work its way between them again.

Some part of him can't believe what's happened, still. There's an echo in his ears, staring at the ceiling, listening to Ilya's breath as it steadily evens out. *I love you*. Ilya's deep voice, the way his accent curls around the 'l' and lingers on the 'v'. So beautiful. He's never said to Ilya how much he loves hearing him talk, how he could listen to him insult his whole team and the entire city of Montreal and some part of him would still love the sound.

This is better, though, a million times better. *I love you*. Oh my god. Shane's never heard anything so good in his life. He thinks, insanely, of pulling out his phone and calling his parents to, like, tell them the good news. *Ilya Rozanov loves me and I love him and Paris is amazing, listen to what's happened here*. But he can't do that, of course, he can't. A miracle has occurred, the closest thing to a miracle that has ever happened in Shane's life, probably, and he can't tell a soul.

He should have held Ilya's hand in the park yesterday, when he'd wanted to. He wishes he had. Even though he could do it now. Even though he has so much more of Ilya touching him right now than that. He still wishes he had done it. It would have been so huge, and maybe would have been nothing at all to anyone else in the park. Anyone else in Paris. Not even as big of a deal as strangers taking their wedding photos on a sunny January day. But big to him, important to him. Right now, he can't imagine *not* touching Ilya, not after today, after *I love you*. How is he ever going to leave the house again, if he can't go outside and hold Ilya's hand?

Shane thinks of that woman they saw, that *bride*, her long white gown flowing over the just-dry grass, her fingers intertwining with her new husband's, and his stomach hollows out a moment, goes empty and longing, for something like that with Ilya. For something open and triumphant and drenched in sunlight.

"Would you ever get married?" Shane blurts out. He immediately feels the flush in his chest and across his cheeks, saying it.

Ilya is silent for a moment. "Yes."

Stupidly, Shane does not immediately understand. "To a woman?" he says, because he can't think of anything else but the white dress, the black tuxedo. There must be one, there must be the other.

Ilya squeezes Shane's chest. "There is a woman here?"

"Shut up," he says reflexively, and then he understands, and he is overcome. He feels heat spread down his neck, across his whole body, and feels almost like he's floating out of it, out of body, losing himself to wonderful, terrible happiness that is drowning him all at once.

Ilya is suddenly heavy and close over him, peering down with soft, searching eyes, looking at him, looking through him, gently flaying him wide open. "Shane. Do you want to get married? Today?"

Shane is too weak right now for a question like that. It means too much; he can't do anything but take it deadly seriously. He closes his eyes, quick and hard, though it doesn't totally keep the hot sting of tears from leaking out at the edges. "Ilya, you have to stop."

"Why? I am serious."

"I know," Shane says. It's embarrassing, how his voice comes out so small and choked. "I feel like I can't even breathe."

"Oh. I did not mean for you to panic." Ilya sounds apologetic, muted. His hand, which has been stroking directionless circles along Shane's chest, stills.

Shane shakes his head, because that isn't right, that isn't what this is. Shane knows what panic feels like. But he has never felt what he feels right now before. He didn't know that happiness and sadness could overcome you at the same time and make you feel like you were on the verge of death. That death has to be on the other side of this feeling, because there is no way to survive the tightness in his chest and in his throat and how his whole body feels like it's going to catch fire.

"No," he whispers, "it's not like that. It's... fuck, *Ilya*." He reaches for Ilya, throws his arms blindly up to him, and Ilya catches him with his own, sprawling out over him. Shane buries his face in the hollow of Ilya's neck, along his shoulder, and breathes him in, and breathes, just breathes.

Shane says, "We can't. We *can't*. But say it again."

"Shane," Ilya whispers, and his voice sounds almost as shaky as Shane's trembling, stuttering heart. "Let's get married."

"Let's... let's pretend like we already did, okay?"

"Okay."

Ilya's strong hands are in his hair and his rumbling voice is in Shane's ear and his precious, even breath warms Shane's temple. Shane memorizes all of this, tucks it into the bleed in his heart, tethers it to the very marrow of him. He wants to keep this moment, so deep, so close, that it becomes part of him, that Ilya becomes part of him, that Shane will forget where he ends and Ilya begins. And when Ilya finds his mouth and kisses him, slides fingers along his jaw, runs his nose along the bridge of Shane's, his chin along the hollow of Shane's cheek, Shane tries to memorize that, too, hold it close. Keep it forever. Never be without him again.

"Oh fuck."

From his position, nestled on the couch between Ilya's legs, his knees crooked over the couch's arm and his head resting in the hollow of Ilya's stomach, Shane can't immediately

see what Ilya is looking at. The television is set to Hawaii 5-0 reruns, the only thing they could find in English, and Ilya is ostensibly scrolling on his phone, and he gives a little snort and then says this. For a moment, Shane's mind goes to the worst: a family emergency. A trade. A sex tape leaking. They don't even have a sex tape, but it comes to mind anyway.

"What?"

"We cannot send this video to Svetlana," Ilya says seriously, and Shane suddenly remembers the rink and laughs.

"You got the kiss?"

"The kiss, I love you, everything. Very incriminating, this video." *Incriminating*. Sometimes Ilya blows Shane's mind, pulling words out of thin air. The other day, he forgot the word *dishwasher*, but *incriminating* comes easily.

Ilya curls a hand into Shane's hair. "She will be very pissed that I did not do as I promised."

"Do you want to tell her?"

Shane has started picturing this, the very murky edges of his own version of disclosure. He has been trying to figure out the perfect combination of words, the magic spell that will make his parents take it perfectly well, be perfectly supportive, ask zero followup questions. *Mom, Dad, Ilya and I, we are something. Together. We love each other. We got so close in Paris, it happened naturally*. It's a half truth, which is slightly better than a complete lie. Somehow, he has to get through the *I'm gay* part, then the *I'm in love with Ilya Rozanov* part. He figures it's only fair for Ilya to be able to do the same.

"Yes. I will tell her sometime. But first, that we are friends. So this video would probably complicate that."

"Make a copy or something, edit out the last part."

"Shane, I am not cinematographer. I do not know how to do any of this."

Shane laughs at Ilya going with *cinematographer*, another beautiful English mystery of Ilya's mind, and turns his head into the soft fabric of Ilya's sweatshirt.

The episode on the TV is centered on a wedding reception, though Shane hasn't been following the thread of the plot at all, only half awake to begin with. He isn't sure if this is a happy ending or the beginning of a tragedy, if the police leads are going to bust in at any time and start raining bullets down the aisle. One of the wedding guests is comically hunched over the bushes behind the altar, making exaggerated puking sounds.

"Ah," Ilya says. "Marley did this."

"He did? When?"

Ilya's hand tightens in Shane's hair, tugs gently back. His thumb rubs over Shane's cheek. "At our wedding. Remember? Marley got too drunk and threw up behind buffet."

Oh. Shane has to blink hard against the onslaught of fearsome happiness that rears up inside him. How can Ilya just say things like that out of nowhere?

Shane nuzzles back into Ilya's stomach, and mumbles into the fabric, "Cliff Marleau came to our wedding?"

"Was our compromise. You wanted Hayden Pike to be best man."

"So Marleau was your best man?"

"No, but only because Marley is idiot. That is why he got too drunk." Ilya huffs. "I think actually I would make Svetlana my best man. She could wear suit, no problem."

Shane laughs. "No way."

"Why no way?"

"You can't make someone you've slept with your *best man*, Ilya."

"There is no rule that says this."

"It's my rule, I'm making the rule!" Shane says. Ilya reaches down and lightly pinches Shane's nose. He bats Ilya's hand away, laughing. "Fuck off."

They are quiet for a moment, watching the TV, but not really.

"You will like her, I think," Ilya says. "I think you will be good friends, eventually."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I love you both very much. In different ways, okay, don't get jealous," he adds, kicking gently at Shane. "You are similar in some ways, I think. And you two will talk too much about hockey and I will be very happy and very bored to listen."

Shane uses his chin to push the hem of Ilya's sweatshirt up, revealing a strip of Ilya's warm, taut stomach, then follows with his hand to pull it up more. He noses into the trail of dark hair leading below Ilya's waistband, presses a kiss there. Ilya tucks the gape of his shirt gently behind Shane's head, out of his way, and plays with the ear Shane has turned upward toward him, rubbing it between his fingers. Shane feels weightless, blissed out, petted to serene death.

"My parents will like you, too," Shane says. "When they meet you, and see how you are in real life. They're going to love you."

"Yes, I think so. I can be very charming."

"Yeah, right," Shane says, and they go quiet together for a while.

It hangs in the room between them, the part that Shane is waiting to hear from Ilya. What about his parents? What about his family? Is it different, because they are Russian? Would

they not be good about it? He wants to ask, but he waits.

Eventually, Ilya says, “My mother would have loved you.”

Oh.

That’s all he needs to say, isn’t it? To make Shane understand. Ilya doesn’t ever waste his words. She would have, but she can’t, because she isn’t here anymore.

Shane shifts his head, cranes upward to take in Ilya’s expression, gazing up at him from below. Ilya is watching him, his eyes soft and sad.

“Ilya. I’m sorry.”

Ilya nods, cradling Shane’s cheek.

“Is okay. Come here.”

And Ilya is pulling him closer, toward his curving mouth, already opening for Shane, already searching for him. Shane sinks into him, and wonders if he will ever find the limits of this happiness, the bounds of this chasm that he fell into nine years ago. Down, and down, and down. He has been falling ever since.

Chapter End Notes

The slow burn that never was has officially ended 😊 The boys were clearly already toast.

Please (so many praying emojis) leave a comment if you are enjoying the fic and thank you for reading! Come find me on tumblr here: [@scacao-blog](#)

Chapter 8: You who suffer because you love, love still more

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane, the day after *I love you*.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.

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

Ilya wakes up, Wednesday morning, and Shane is wrapped around him, his hair tickling under Ilya's chin and his body warm and sticky under the sheets. Shane's hand has crawled inside of Ilya's waistband sometime during the night and is resting innocently on Ilya's soft dick. Ilya is sweaty, because they slept on each other all night, and his breath is unbelievable, because he sucked Shane's dick after he brushed his teeth but before he fell asleep, and Ilya is the happiest he's ever been and maybe ever will be.

It was not a joke, what he said yesterday about getting married. It may be impossible, but it was not a joke. He would marry Shane right now, find a minister who makes house calls and have the ceremony performed right here, naked in bed. They could sign the certificate and then dive back under the covers and never, ever come out again.

Ilya lets the moment stretch, doesn't turn it into something more all at once. There is no rush, there is no schedule to adhere to. There is only the bed, there are only their bodies against each other. The soft sighs of their breaths, the twin beating of their hearts.

Over the top of Shane's head, the sky is unexpectedly clear, a riotous blue dotted with white clouds and the Eiffel Tower jutting up into it. A postcard right outside their bedroom. Ilya wonders whether he can sneak a photo of this, too, whether he can reach his phone without disrupting Shane's sleep. He'd have to include the whole scene: Shane's dark head in the foreground, the tasty expanse of his back and shoulders, the crumpled white sheets pooled at their waists, and then he'd have to save it in the password-protected folder where he keeps the awards selfies and yesterday's locker room kiss that he'd promised to delete but knew he never could.

He doesn't. He doesn't want to disturb Shane, even to preserve the memory. He lets Shane sleep a little longer, warm hand cradling him. Every part of Ilya's body is warm, too, and his heart stretches and leaps and pumps burning joy into every last part of him.

There are many Russian sayings about having too much of a good thing, an important lesson to take to heart in a country whose history could be summed up as *And then it got worse*. But there is also a saying his mother loved to say, that he always loved, too, like he loved everything of hers. *When you can, use a long knife and a big spoon*. He used to imagine a table setting of huge utensils, so big he couldn't hold them in his little hands, and trying to use them to cut a birthday cake or *ptichye moloko*. He is imagining it again now, feels like that's exactly what he's doing, taking Mama's advice. Enjoying happiness to the fullest, while it lasts, lapping up the exquisite joy of loving and being loved by Shane Hollander with the biggest spoon he can possibly manage. All of Paris, his long knife.

Shane makes a little aborted noise, the first indication he's shifting into wakefulness. Ilya, as carefully as he can manage with most of a two-hundred pound athlete on his chest, wriggles down the bed from under Shane's grasp, until he's lined up with the cradle of Shane's hips. He pushes Shane's thigh gently back, angles his ass toward the bed, until he has access to Shane's soft cock, nestled into his little thicket of pubic hair like a present in cellophane. Ilya nuzzles it with his cheek, his chin, surrounded by the scent of Shane, here where it's strongest, settling over him like a blanket, familiar and precious and intoxicating. Shane is mostly or entirely asleep, Ilya can't exactly tell, when his dick starts to stir to life, hardening under Ilya's open mouth kisses. He doesn't react until Ilya has him mostly hard and is just playing with the tip of Shane's cockhead, flickering over it with his tongue.

"Mm... Ilya?" Shane mumbles, then laughs, hoarsely says, "Good morning. What the fuck?"

"Good morning," Ilya says. Shane's cock is beginning to leak, always good for him, always up for it. He drags his teeth along the ridge of the head, chasing with a wet kiss.

Shane, awake enough now to participate, digs a hand into Ilya's hair, shifts to lay back on the bed. Ilya pushes the bedsheets back from his head so he can see Shane's pretty face, big doe eyes so soft for him, mouth already open in a little aroused pout. Another precious thing, this expression that is tailor-made for Ilya, that no one else gets to see. Shane said as much, the other day. Just his alone.

"What are you doing?" Shane says, even as he's bucking a little against Ilya's tongue, at the lack of pressure, the lack of suction.

"I think you know." Ilya raises his eyebrows. "You want me to stop?"

"No, don't stop."

So Ilya doesn't. He swallows Shane, works his dick in long pulls, his mouth and tongue lapping over him. He reaches around Shane's big thighs, spreads him open enough to dip a finger between his cheeks and rub against the resistance of Shane's hole, too dry to push it in that way, but the promise or the threat of it is enough to make Shane push up into Ilya's mouth and twist his fingers hard enough in Ilya's hair to hurt and shoot his load to the back of Ilya's throat. His voice is still scratchy from sleep, moaning Ilya's name.

It sounds too good like this, *Ilya*, in Shane's Canadian drawl, drowsy and hoarse with arousal, almost a sigh, or a prayer. Too good, too good. Ilya could never find a big enough spoon to fit all of this *good* in one swallow.

Ilya crawls up Shane's body, meets him at his mouth, lets him taste the trace of his own cum in the sloppy kiss he presses to Shane's lips.

"I love you," Ilya says, and Shane goes limp and adoring in his arms. So beautiful, first thing this morning, half of his hair still sticking out sideways from the way he'd slept against Ilya's chest.

It should be illegal, to feel this good, this happy. Then, his father's voice, his brother's, in his head, against Ilya's volition: *two faggots in love? Actually, it is.*

No, let's not do that, he thinks. Long knife, big spoon. And so much more of Shane to enjoy in this bright morning.

"Come on," he says, rising up, placing his knees on either side of Shane's armpits, hunching down over his pretty mouth with his hard dick in his hand. "Your turn."

Shane is perfect, and pliable, and wants this just as bad as Ilya, because he might be an angel, sent from above to save or ruin Ilya's life. He just opens his mouth obediently and lets Ilya slide his cock between his red lips, takes it in as far as the awkward angle will allow. Ilya fucks shallow thrusts into Shane's soft mouth, bracing his free hand against the wall, Shane's hands touching him everywhere, running up and down his thighs and straining up to squeeze into his chest and sliding under Ilya's dick to cup his balls, wanting Ilya to feel as good as possible, wanting to do a good job always, just fucking perfect, his perfect, beautiful boy. His Shane.

"Yes, Shane, so good. Like that, ah, your tongue, fuck, you love it, don't you, love this cock choking you, love to get your pretty face fucked."

Ilya just talks, loose nonsense, whatever comes to mind, because he knows it drives Shane fucking crazy to hear it. He loves the feedback, needs it, probably. If Ilya isn't talking, Shane gets needy and antsy and starts asking questions, just to draw a reaction. Sometimes, that's what Ilya wants, to wind Shane up like a toy until he's taut as a wire and will shoot off at any stupid thing Ilya says about his cock or his ass or his mouth. This morning, though, he's already been so good for him, coming to consciousness dripping wet and ready, and Ilya just wants to reward him.

"Yes, like that, fuck, you want my cum that bad, hm? You want to swallow my cum and show me how fucking good you make me feel?"

Shane hums low in his throat, happy as a clam. The reverb is enough to have Ilya jerk off the length of his dick he can fit his hand around, whatever isn't wrapped in Shane's sweet mouth, and he's coming with a choked shout and pressing his forehead up against his braced hand to keep himself from collapsing on Shane.

"That was so hot," Shane breathes out below him.

Ilya extricates himself carefully, moves gently around Shane's body. Legs slide down over legs, chests press together, warm sticky skin on skin. Breaths even back to baseline and hearts beat where they are separated from each other by so little, just skin, just sinew, just bone. If

Ilya lines them up just so, it's like they're one heart beating, one heart pumping blood between two sets of arteries, and he can forget that Shane is separate from him and that he is separate from Shane, and they can be one, foreheads pressed together, eyes closed, a single organism. Until Shane, unable to ignore biology any longer, finally shifts uncomfortably beneath him and reminds him he has to piss and brush his teeth.

It's nice, having one mirror, one vanity to share, Ilya thinks, maybe for the first time. The luxury of space is nothing to the luxury of Shane, wrapping his arms around Ilya's chest, bumping up against him while Ilya hogs the whole setup to run a razor across his face. Shane reaches unnecessarily around Ilya to grab his toothbrush, just an excuse to be close, probably, a way for Shane to keep watching Ilya shave, his dark eyes watching too intently for this not to be some kind of turn on for him.

"What?" Ilya says, seeing if he can turn the hot look in Shane's eyes into a second round here on the cold bathroom tiles.

But Shane just nuzzles into his shoulder and says, "I love you," and Ilya has to kiss him, sweet and soft instead, makes him spit out the toothpaste foam he lathered up inside his mouth first, because he thought he could say something like that and not be kissed. Ilya gets shaving gel all over Shane's cheek and along the side of his nose, and comes away with a froth of Shane's toothpaste sticking to his lips.

Ilya's heart is going to burst, probably, make a big mess on this upscale bathroom floor and the nice marble countertop. Fuck, *fuck*, he's so happy. That little part of him that is always looking for the dark edge of things is ringing, in this blissful moment at the sink, and Ilya hates himself a little for it. Just let go, just enjoy. He's triumphant, he has the one thing he's wanted for close to ten years, and still some part of him is looking for the catch, the thread to pull that will unravel it all.

Long knife. Long knife, big spoon.

"Is nice outside today," he says, just to shake himself out of it. "We should go somewhere."

"Hm, yeah. Where? Notre Dame?"

"What is with Notre Dame? Second time you've brought up this place."

"You're the one that wanted to go."

"Ah, did I?" Ilya turns back to the sink, rinses his razor out under the water. "Let's go somewhere in the car, I did not drive it enough yet. Out of the city."

"Okay," Shane says, and Ilya kisses him again. Then, wanders off into the bedroom to get dressed.

Shane comes out of the bathroom with his phone out, turning it for Ilya to see the fruits of his research. "What about Versailles? Looks kind of cool."

Ilya thumbs through the photos and decides it looks perfect without much persuasion needed. He really just wants to wander somewhere with Shane and maybe get the road head he hasn't stopped fantasizing about since he slid into the driver's seat yesterday. Versailles looks like a good enough place for that as anywhere, ludicrously ornate and vaguely reminiscent of a Tsarist summer palace he visited with his class when he was thirteen years old. He remembers sneaking off behind the convenient topiaries to smoke with his friends.

They suck down their protein shakes and Shane makes an appointment for express laundry pickup, unable to put up with the state of their bedsheets any longer. "Fifteen minutes," he says, and Ilya takes the opportunity to smoke, smiles wide at Shane's grimace when he heads to the terrace. He meant what he said about just finishing up this pack, but he still plans to savor what he's got left.

Cigarette in hand, Ilya thumbs through self-pitying texts in the Raiders group chat, calling him a fucking asshole for chasing pussy in Paris and getting stranded as a result, half meaning it. Yesterday was the Raiders' first game with the volcano tax in effect, and short their C, they lost 4-1 to New York, insult to injury, trounced by senior citizens. It's just as easy to blame it on Ilya's absence as it is the lack of depth to their bench, so he gets to be the bad guy. Ilya had meant to watch the game, try to find a stream on his phone and squint at it maybe, but then *I love you* and *I love you too* had happened and he'd ended up passed out long before the game started in Paris time, wrapped up in Shane, rendered almost hungover in the aftermath.

Montreal lost too, to Tampa at home, which is so gross that Ilya feels a little better in comparison thinking about it. He's sure Shane is getting it from all sides right now. He's been complaining all week about what an asshole Theriault has been about all of this.

Who fucking cares, Ilya thinks. They're here, they're untouchable. Hockey is something to worry about for later. Maybe never again. Maybe Ilya will just retire here, enter his second career of fucking Shane forever.

The Porsche is mercifully where they left it, when Ilya was not all that concerned with getting towed but now thinks that would be a shitty way to start the day. Fate is still smiling on them, after all. That good feeling lasts until he connects to CarPlay and his phone flashes *Алексей* on the center console. Ilya cuts it quickly, but of course, not quickly enough for Shane not to notice.

"Is your family doing okay?" Shane says, even though it's probably a lucky guess, because Ilya's sure he's never told Shane his brother's name and he's also pretty sure Shane can't read Cyrillic.

"I still want to fuck you in this car before we return it," Ilya says, sliding his palm over Shane's leg, not even a very clever distraction, just a hail mary he throws Shane's way, because it sounds better than *please don't ask me about my fucking family* and there is the off-chance it will lead to something Ilya actually wants.

"Not a chance," Shane says, bait taken, mercifully.

They drive the forty-five minutes to Versailles, Ilya's music drowning out the road noise, Shane making fun of him for it, though Ilya is sure Shane listens exclusively to gregorian chants or some other strange ambient sonic experiment meant to modulate his hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis or some fucking nonsense. He turns up *The Hills* and does his best impression of The Weeknd just to annoy Shane further.

Ilya laces their hands together over the console and squeezes, rubs the back of Shane's hand with his thumb. Every touch, every glance Shane throws his way hits Ilya in his gut, in the softest part of him. He wants this forever, has never wanted anything the way he's wanted this, Shane's love, Shane's casual affection, his bright eyes and his smile and the scrunch of freckles along his nose when he laughs. Ilya is fucked, truly fucked, he is never going to be able to live without this again. He pulls Shane's hand up to his lips, presses a desperate little kiss to his knuckles, and wishes this drive could go on and on, into eternity, into nothingness, sublimate them both into air and let them disappear into this impossible happiness.

Shane's phone dings as they're wandering around an ornate hall in the palace. He hopes it's not fucking Coach again, pissed at him because he can't be pissed at a natural disaster instead. Yes, they lost to Tampa, yes for the first time at home in five years, but it's not Shane's fucking fault, is it? He's not really sure what Theriault expects him to do, except maybe grow wings and fly home.

It's not Theriault, he sees when he pulls his phone out to check. It's his news alerts. The volcano has not been active in eighteen hours, since sometime early yesterday evening. The ash cloud in the sky is still massive, but no longer growing, the articles say. But it's still there. Airlines are optimistically saying airspace might be safe to reopen early next week. *Early next week* makes Shane vaguely nauseous and panicked, but it's not *today*. It's not *now*.

He puts his phone away, wanders around the giant room with Ilya, looking at portraits of different French rulers, or maybe the same rulers, in slightly different clothes. Insane dresses, panniers so wide it must have been impossible to fit through doors. Robes piled one on top of the other, bulkier and surely heavier than all of his gear. Louis XIV made everyone paint him with his legs sticking out in a cute little ballet pose. Dozens and dozens of portraits, it seems, of the Sun King poised to do a little pirouette.

Shane debates not telling Ilya about the volcano at all. Maybe it's not a big deal. Maybe it doesn't mean anything, if the volcano stopped erupting, maybe it doesn't mean the ash that's already in the sky isn't going to keep planes grounded for a long time, anyway. Maybe he should take his phone out again, look up whether that's true. Maybe there are some scientists who have already updated their estimations.

Ilya looks at him. "What is it?"

He doesn't have to say it. It's not a *lie*, it's just, like, not wanting to bring down the mood, or something. Shane will probably get over it in an hour or so. Maybe less, if he finds some

information online to reassure himself that flights aren't starting back up again tomorrow.

"The volcano stopped erupting," he blurts out.

Ilya nods. "Okay."

He turns fully toward Shane. They're in front of Marie-Antoinette, who probably didn't know anything about volcanoes in Iceland and definitely doesn't understand the terrifying power they hold right now over Shane's happiness, his future. Oh well, there was all that stuff with the guillotine, so it's not like her life was all that much easier.

"It does not mean anything," Ilya says. "They will probably still keep airspace closed for a while."

"Yeah," Shane says, "Probably."

For some reason, Ilya saying it makes Shane feel a little better. His phone stays in his pocket, for now, and he follows Ilya into the next room, another giant hall, so much gold leaf and marble detail that it starts to overwhelm the eye and bleed together, one giant overrich assault on Shane's vision.

The thing that Shane has been dreading finally happens while they're looking at a picture of Napoleon, rearing up on a white horse, his outstretched finger pointing to something beyond the horse's wild eye. There have been a lot more horses than dogs this time around. Ilya's phone has come out for photos much less as a result.

"Um, excuse me?"

Behind them are two girls, late teens or early twenties, and their phones are already out and in their hands when their eyes go wide and one says, "Oh my god, are you actually Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov?"

They look at each other, then back to the girls.

"Yes," Ilya says.

"Holy shit," one girl breathes, curly brown hair, sweatshirt with a *UdeM* logo emblazoned on the front of it. Oh.

"You guys are Canadian," Shane says.

"Yes, oh my god," the other girl says, can't stop looking over to her friend and touching her blond hair, like she's worried it's falling out of her ponytail in her excitement. "We go to *L'Université de Montréal*. Go Metros!"

"Holy shit, my dad is going to *freak out*."

So might Shane, in about thirty seconds. Ilya is completely unbothered, smiling casually. God, at least Ilya wasn't copping a feel or something. There's still some plausible deniability.

The girls ask for a picture, the curly-haired one holding out her phone. Shane can't think of any way to say no that isn't impolite or implies there is something clandestine going on that should be kept out of the view of a camera. So Shane says, "Sure."

Everyone gets into the celebrity photo position that Shane might as well teach classes on by now: Ilya and Shane huddle, the girls in the middle, and everyone smiles. Shane's smile might be a little strained, but Ilya's is huge and radiant. Ilya's arm is around him, as if pulling him closer for the sake of the photo.

It's fine, Shane assures himself. It passes the smell test. No one is going to even see it, the girls are in the way. Shane's fingers tangle into the fabric of Ilya's jacket, for the split second that the shutter clicks. Then, everyone pulls away, the girls effervescent, jumpy from the shock of coming across their hometown hero in a random room in the Palace of Versailles. Napoleon is fine with it. His horse, at least, has the good sense to look freaked out.

"So you guys are friends?" The blonde girl says, as they both scrutinize the photo.

"Yes, we are friends," Ilya says. "Shh. Don't tell, or we will make you sign NDA." He leans toward her and winks, and it has its intended effect. Both girls giggle, and that's it. The information is just accepted: Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are friends.

It's out there now. Maybe these girls will keep this photo for themselves. Maybe they will send it to their dads, and it will be a funny story. Maybe it will be forgotten in a week or two. Or maybe, the photo will be all over hockey Twitter in an hour and Shane will be fielding texts about fraternizing with the enemy or whatever.

So you guys are friends?

Yes. Tell the world about it.

"See? Was not so bad," Ilya says in the next room over.

"Yeah."

They wander around a few more halls, until it gets monotonous, until Shane isn't really looking at the paintings at all, just thinking about Ilya's wide smile in the girl's camera and his hand on Shane's back. The last time they took a selfie together, they hadn't even said *I love you* to each other yet. It's a dumb thing to think about. It's a dumb thing to not be able to stop thinking about. The two men in that girl's photo are in love, so in love that Shane wonders if it's seeping out of their expressions, in the way they stand beside each other, in the tenor of their voices. If those girls look at the photo long enough, will they notice it, too? Because Shane feels like he's soggy with it, full of bursting. He loves Ilya so fucking much that he can't see how everyone else in the world hasn't already noticed, too.

They make their way to the gardens behind the palace, and it's lovely and grandiose and all Shane wants to do is look at Ilya. There are a million gleaming statues of Greek gods and massive gilded fountains and the most beautiful thing is Ilya standing next to them in his black ensemble and his opaque Raybans and his golden hair shining in the sunlight. Shane

wants to stare at the side of his face and the pout of his lips and the reddened curl of his ear and nothing else, ever again, for the rest of his life.

They race down a grand staircase toward the lower grounds. Ilya starts the race by fucking cheating and pushing Shane behind him. Shane almost demands they go again, but Ilya is already running off toward the huge reflecting pool and its vast lawn that seems to stretch all the way to the other side of the city.

The water is shallow and dark, and there are little huddles of ducks here and there, dipping into the water and bobbing back up, and two fat swans treading water together, necks closing into a little heart, reflected beneath them, chopped up slightly by little waves kicked up by the breeze. Shane watches them, and watches them, and thinks about how nice it must be to live your whole life a stupid happy little swan with your swan boyfriend floating on a pond in Versailles. Maybe those two swans told each other they loved each other last night, too. Maybe this also feels, to them, like the first day of the rest of their lives.

Shane is thinking about the photo again. About how somewhere, on a sophomore's camera roll, is the only evidence of the two of them that shows yesterday's aftermath, the goofy soft smile Ilya couldn't suppress, too blissed-out to offer any bite even for a good photo. Shane's arm around him behind the two girls, gently grasping into the fabric of his jacket, unable to stop touching him, even a little, even for a moment.

Secretly, those girls know more about Ilya and Shane than even his parents do, now. His parents don't know that Shane lay awake last night after Ilya fell asleep and listened to him breathe and tried to match his own breaths with Ilya's, tried to time it so their chests rose and fell at the same time. They don't know that Shane will never again skate out to center ice without some echo of Ilya's *I love you* ringing in his ears, that nothing will ever meet that high again, no face-off, no victory, no playoff win, no Stanley Cup hoisted over his head.

That isn't right. He has always felt like a bad fucking son for lying to his parents, years of keeping this enormous, ruinous secret from them. The gap between who they know him to be and who he actually is, right now, on this cold park bench beside the love of his life is so wide that Shane doesn't think he can stand it anymore.

And he has to start somewhere, right? He has to bring them in, just a little, into this new world they've stepped into, he and Ilya.

"I'm gonna call my mom," Shane says.

"Okay. Do you want me to—"

"No, stay here," Shane says, puts a hand on Ilya's knee. Ilya's eyes go soft.

"Okay."

Shane's heart is lodged firmly in his throat as the call connects, FaceTime, fuck the roaming fees. His Mom picks up quickly, from the dining room table, her glasses on, probably in the middle of reviewing the Dior contract. He'd gotten the email from his lawyer, too, last night; he just obviously had bigger things going on.

“Hi Shane! How are you, honey?”

“Hi Mom.”

“Looks like nice weather over there! What time is it?”

“It’s like, noon? We’re at the Palace of Versailles.”

He lists off some of the stuff they’ve seen: the Grand Ballroom, Apollo’s Fountain, the Grand Canal, where they are currently sitting and watching the swans. Yes, it’s nice. No, it’s not too cold today. Not sure what the rest of the day’s plans are yet, they’re going to go grab a bite to eat in a bit. Maybe by the *Place du Marché*. His mom wants to ask him about the Dior stuff, he can tell, but she won’t as long as they are out sightseeing. And anyway, he’s going to go with whatever she and his lawyer say, in that order.

“How’s Dad? How’s stuff at home?”

She starts to talk about Dad’s poker night, with his old McGill friends who live close enough to come around regularly, Uncle Ben and Uncle Stanley and Uncle Dean to Shane, who used to always say *I knew you when you were this big* and whose combined energy in the den on Friday nights used to overwhelm Shane in his younger years, force him into polite retreat to his parents’ room where the TV was so he could watch taped hockey games with the lights off until the downstairs noise faded away.

Somewhere in this story, Uncle Stanley and Dad both all-in, both staring down high pocket pairs, Mom already knocked out with a bad deal on the river a few hands before, Shane gets an insane idea. It’s the fault of the clutch in his throat, probably, or the way his leg is leaning against Ilya’s, or the way Ilya is listening to their conversation with the softest, fondest expression, the way his eyes are resting on Shane, the way that makes every cell in Shane’s body bloom and pitch toward Ilya, as if to soak up the warmth of Ilya’s gaze on him, like a plant attempting photosynthesis, like Ilya’s gentle smile and lidded eyes are the sunlight Shane needs to live.

The idea is barely formed when it comes out of his mouth, awkward, rushed, not run by anyone, least of all Ilya, blurted out the minute his mom ends her story. Dad won, or maybe Uncle Stanley won, or maybe they drew, Shane doesn’t even hear it, just hears himself say, “Hey Mom, Ilya wants to say hi!” and glances over to Ilya and sees Ilya’s eyes go wide.

“Ilya Rozanov?” she says, like Shane could mean anyone else.

Ilya looks at him like he’s lost his mind. He definitely has. This is crazy, what is he thinking?

What he’s thinking is: this is the most important person in the world to me, and this is the other most important person in the world to me, and I can’t keep you two separate parts of myself anymore, I don’t have the strength for it. I don’t want to live these two lives anymore. I want you to know each other. I want the people I love to love each other, too.

“Yeah, Mom, just really quick, okay?” Shane says, and presses his phone into Ilya’s hands, mouths *please*. Ilya’s face smoothes out and he looks at Shane for a long second, then down

at his mom's very confused expression on the screen.

"Hello, Mrs. Hollander."

"Um. Hi, Rozanov."

"Ilya."

"Sorry! Ilya, sorry. Force of habit."

"Ah."

"Well," Mom says, which is how she starts sentences she doesn't know how she intends to finish. "How are you liking Paris?"

"It's very nice. Very very beautiful. Good food. Shane and I have been trying all the croissants in our neighborhood."

Shane has never heard Ilya use this tone of voice, this cadence before. He's being polite. He's trying to make a good impression on Shane's mom, like a good boyfriend. A good son-in-law, Shane thinks, and wants to laugh and then maybe pass out. Is definitely going to pass out, definitely, definitely.

He stands up abruptly, hurries in a panicked jog to the pool edge, abandoning Ilya and his mom on the bench without looking behind him. He stares down at the black water curling at the lip of the lawn, breathes in hard, too quickly. It doesn't help. Blows his breath back out and it comes out rattling and wheezy, like there's a sieve where his lungs should be. Fuck, what has he done? Fuck, fuck, fuck. He puts his hands on his knees and keels over, closes his eyes, and just tries to breathe, tries and tries.

Some time later, a minute or two or ten or an hour, he feels Ilya walk up beside him. Shane opens his eyes just enough to see Ilya's trainers, the elastic edge of his sweats where they end high on his ankles, even his athletic gear given some innate European aura in the cut and fit. Ilya's big hand comes up to gently grip into the back of Shane's neck and squeezes.

"Your mother is very nice," Ilya says. He's holding Shane's phone in his free hand.

"I'm sorry," Shane mumbles. "I don't know why I did that, I'm sorry."

"Do not say sorry," Ilya says. Squeezes. "You did not do anything wrong. That was a good thing, I think."

"Good?"

"Yes. It was good." Ilya moves his hand just inside the collar of Shane's coat and rubs a little, thumb kneading in where his shoulders are tensing and pulling taut.

Ilya's hand is warm and heavy and feels so nice, a weighted blanket on his neck, a point he can focus on and push up into and straighten up against until he's back to standing, back to breathing somewhat normally, can look Ilya in the eye again. Ilya hands him back his phone.

“I’m glad I got to meet her,” Ilya says.

“Yeah. Me too.”

Shane stares at the swans, the two swan boyfriends, he’s decided. Swan Ilya, swan Shane. They are closer now, drifting toward this side of the canal. They are actually huge birds, Shane thinks. He’s not sure he’s ever seen one so close before.

“Do they have swans in Russia?”

“Yes. Do they have swans in Canada?”

“Yeah.” Shane blows out his breath, maybe the final one that was lodged in his chest, making his heart race. “Fuck. We’re really doing this, aren’t we?”

Ilya looks at him, warming him, setting him on fire. He nods.

“If you want.”

“I want.”

“Me, too.”

Shane wants to hold his hand. He wants to throw his arms around Ilya’s neck and kiss him so hard, here on this cold, muddy grass next to these fucking swans, until there are no passerby that haven’t figured them out, can’t misconstrue them as anything else except lovers, *ugh*, boyfriends, that’s better. Kiss him until the entire world knows that Ilya is his, he doesn’t know how, but he *is*, he’s Shane’s, Ilya loves him, he’s the luckiest man on earth, probably. Lucky, so lucky, he can’t believe it, to love someone and have them love him back, it’s the luckiest you can be in this lifetime, probably. Oh fuck, he wants to hold Ilya so badly that it hurts in his fucking heart.

“Shane…” Ilya says.

“Ilya.” Shane thinks if Ilya says his name one more time, he’s going to do it, kiss him out in the open, fuck it all.

“Shane— oh *fuck*, watch out—”

There is some sudden honking, way too fucking close to them, and Shane turns quickly back to the water to see the swans are bearing down on them, the bigger one— swan Ilya?— flapping its wings and rearing up with its floppy alien neck and baring its teeth as it stomps its way out of the water and moves toward them with alarming speed. Shane barely has time to put his phone back in his pocket and grab for Ilya before the swan is *lunging* at them— it’s *huge*, it looks like it could do some real damage in a fight— and they’re running back toward the relative safety of the park bench and the gravel path and the swan is honking like crazy behind them but is apparently satisfied when he has his little patch of grass back, keeps a freaky black eye fixed on them while he settles down victoriously into the mud, swan Shane nuzzling up beside him and plopping his head down into the puff of feathers at his back.

Ilya is breathing hard and clutching onto Shane's coat at the shoulder. "Fuck that fucking bird, what the *fuck!*"

Shane laughs and tries to catch his breath. "No swans at the wedding."

"No swans at the wedding. No birds at all. My rule, now. *Fuck*. Come on, let's go. Fucking *swan*, motherfucker."

Ilya is shaken the entire walk back through the grounds, keeps shaking his head and reaching for his cigarettes beneath his jacket, before remembering there's no smoking in the gardens.

"It was so fucking *big*, Shane. Why does it need to be so big? What do they feed it?"

They get to the palace entrance, Ilya lighting up as soon as they've moved through the giant crowd lined up for tickets and snapping pictures and pouring out of tour buses, and by now Ilya has moved on to assessing whether he could take the swan in a fight, what his strategy would be.

"I could grab it by the neck, maybe. If I had to. But, I don't know. Is it illegal to fight a swan? I don't want fucking bird police coming after me."

"Louis XIV would have your head chopped off for killing his swan, I think."

"Shane. You would get revenge for me, right? You would kill this bird, if I was taken to prison for this."

"I don't know, Ilya, I've kind of got a lot going on," Shane says. "I don't want to go to bird jail, either."

"You're terrible, Hollander. You break my heart, you know. The wedding is off." Ilya blows smoke away from Shane's face, then turns back to him, theatrically angry.

"Because I won't kill a swan for you?"

"Yes. Good husband would do this," Ilya says seriously, but knocks gently against Shane at the same time, turns it into a half hug, his arms sliding over Shane's shoulders as they walk, gripping into his coat.

Shane ducks his head down, but they stay that way, at least until they're close to the *Place du Marché* and then there are just too many people to do it anymore. It's crowded, they have to break apart to avoid running into people as they walk, it's natural. He misses Ilya's arm as soon as it's gone, but.

They peruse the menus of the huddle of restaurants until they find one that sounds acceptable— Moroccan, Ilya should give him credit for being so adventurous— and Shane can accept his consolation prize of getting to sit alone with Ilya at a tiny table in a warm little restaurant, arguing about whether swans are dinosaurs or not. He can forget that the volcano has stopped erupting, that his mom and his dad and Ilya have all collided together in an irreversible way, that time is moving forward around them and his life is changing and that all

he wants, all he wants more than anything, is for it to stay exactly like this, exactly the same as it is right now with Ilya, in their little private world, forever.

Ilya will get Mrs. Hollander a gift before they leave Paris. She was very gracious when Shane had his moment of manic bravery and threw his phone into Ilya's hands. If she had any sort of feelings about him, any personal animosity, she kept them kindly hidden, nice like Shane is nice, maybe nicer, because Ilya is at best a stranger to her. Or maybe Ilya's magic works on all the branches of the Hollander family tree. She asked him how he was liking Paris, asked him what he and Shane were getting up to, asked him how his team was doing, in a way that didn't feel like barely disguised intel gathering. She called him Ilya. Those five minutes were the most time he has had with anyone's mother since he was twelve years old. Even basking in the secondhand glow of her love for Shane, Ilya felt warm for it.

He sits on the couch with Shane, feet up on the expensive coffee table because it makes Shane crazy, and scrolls through the EU websites of brands he thinks she might like: YSL, Chanel, Goyard. What is an appropriate gift for the mom of your secret lover? Everything is cheaper in Europe, a nice thirty percent off for free, but he'll buy her anything. She deserves thirty grand of stuff, minimum, for bringing Shane into the world and being so nice to Ilya even after he has subsequently ruined him.

"What kind of stuff does your mom like?" Ilya asks Shane, who is sitting upright on his phone beside him, just their legs touching. He has a knot in his forehead, so probably he's reading about the estimates of when the airspace might open back up. Or Montreal's dogshit performance against Tampa last night.

"Stuff?" Shane says, scrolling.

"Yes, perfume, purses, stuff like this. I will get her something while we are in Paris."

Shane looks up from his phone. "You're gonna buy my mom a gift?"

"We are friends now," Ilya says, then smiles, remembers he can say, "I am very good son-in-law."

It thrills him too much, probably. A shot of adrenaline and pure, unfiltered joy, whenever he gets to act marriage out with Shane.

Shane smiles. "This is fucking crazy."

"Was your idea."

Shane laughs, says, "I know. Still fucking crazy."

"Yes."

“I don’t know about perfume or anything, sorry. A purse, I guess, is fine? Just make sure it’s really big. She carries her laptop and like fifty other things in there all the time. But you, uh, you don’t have to get her anything. I don’t think she’s expecting you to.”

“Ah. Good. Thank you, Shane.”

Ilya, attention back on his phone, tabs over to Goyard. Maybe he can order something online, and pick it up in person. Something big enough for a laptop. Maybe Mrs. Hollander will be impressed that Ilya chose something so fitting for her. Maybe she’ll know Shane helped him do it, and it will be that much more evidence that their lives have become intertwined.

They settle back into silence for a while, Ilya flipping through too many color options, Shane absently fidgeting his bottom lip between his index finger and thumb. Ilya wants to ask him what he’s reading about, but also doesn’t. Doesn’t want to have the conversation about going home, if the eruption is really over, if flights will pick up again next week. It makes Ilya’s stomach sick to even think about.

If they don’t talk about it out loud, then maybe it won’t happen. Guys don’t like talking about winning or losing in the locker rooms during playoffs, it’s bad luck. This is also something like that.

So Ilya will find something else to talk about. Maybe his new favorite subject, Mrs. Yuna Hollander. He wants to know everything about Shane, about his family, though maybe this is a self-destructive idea. Maybe Ilya will be naturally expected to reciprocate, because that is what lovers do, and because Shane can’t possibly understand what a horror Ilya’s family is.

Maybe he should, though. Tell Shane, help him understand it. Start with his mother, the bright point, the North Star, then work his way down to the muck of his brother and his father. Shane will know that Ilya is rather damaged goods, then, but Shane loves him, so. Maybe that will be enough to carry them through it.

“What was her name?” Ilya says.

“Yuna.”

“Shane. Obviously I know this.” Although thinking of it now, Ilya isn’t sure Shane told him or if he discerned this through watching all of the available ESPN documentaries on Shane Hollander, so maybe it shouldn’t be that obvious. “What was her, ah... name before marriage?”

“Her maiden name?”

“Yes. Maiden name. Same in Russian.”

“Oh.” Shane looks up from his phone. “Satou.”

Ilya rolls the name around in his head a bit. He knew that Shane’s mother was Japanese, probably from another profile he watched alone on his couch in Boston. He wonders whether the two of them could go to Japan someday. It’s likely no one would know them there, either.

He's started making a list of places like this, wishful thinking for a world where Shane and he are forever, past Paris, where they will need to survive probably ten more years off of secret hideaways to fuck and love and truly exist in.

He wonders if Yuna Hollander speaks Japanese. If Shane maybe speaks a little, even though he's been in Canada his entire life, as far as Ilya knows. There is so much to know about him, precious things, and they've spent so many years not talking about them. Ilya spent so many years pretending he didn't want to know. Now, he feels like a glutton, for wanting to squeeze them all out of Shane, swallow them all down.

"Are your grandparents here, too?" he asks, before he remembers that *here* is not a normal *here* for either of them. "Ah, in Canada, I mean."

Shane nods. "My grandma is, yeah. Near my parents in Ottawa. My grandpa died when I was, like, five? I didn't really know him."

Ilya nods and imagines Shane at his grandmother's house, sitting down for a family dinner, his mother and his father at the table with him. A future where Ilya is at that table, too. Asking Mrs. Satou about Shane's grandfather. The thought is briefly too blinding to picture safely, like looking directly at the sun. Ilya will look too long, want it too much, and be blinded by his greed.

"Satou is a nice name."

Shane laughs. "It's like, the most common name in Japan, I think."

"Maybe so, but not in Canada."

"No. Not in Canada."

Ilya, despite the last unbelievable week of his life, has never thought much about the conventions of marriage. About how a Yuna Satou can become a Yuna Hollander, how families bleed together that way, how a name can be like glue. Or like a vise. It is more common now not to change one's name, but when Ilya was born, there was hardly a choice. His mother married Grigori Rozanov, Irina Zaitseva became Irina Rozanova. Ilya did not get to decide if he would rather be a Zaitsev or a Rozanov. Shane did not get to choose between Satou or Hollander. He wonders which one Shane would have chosen, if he did. Ilya knows which one he would have.

"Would you change it?" he says now to Shane.

"Change what?"

"Your name. Would you change it for marriage?"

"Oh." Shane considers it, probably for the first time, just like Ilya. Whatever marriage means for two men, there are no assumptions. No fifty year old man taking it for granted that his twenty year old bride will be *Rozanova*. Everything between them would be a negotiation, a mutual understanding. Equally fought for, equally shared. Ilya wonders if his mom would be

happy for him, for this new interpretation of marriage. More freedom than she was ever granted herself.

“No,” he says finally. “I like my name.”

“I like it too, Hollander.”

Shane smiles, eyes on Ilya’s mouth when he speaks. “I’ve always liked how you say it.”

“Yes, I know.”

There is no reason not to say it then, not to lean into the delicious wanting of impossible dreams a little more. Ilya says, “Maybe I’ll change my name then. Ilya Hollander.”

It feels good in his mouth, vowels and consonants that cascade pleasantly over his tongue. So many *el* sounds, but spaced evenly apart, not a tongue-twister of a name. Kind of a trick of fate, that his one great love would have a name that sounds so nice, even with *Ilya* haphazardly appended.

This is more or less all that Ilya is thinking when he says it. There doesn’t seem to be any great stakes, they’ve been playing at this marriage talk for a couple of days already. But Ilya can be careless, and sometimes worse. Sometimes he doesn’t know the line he crosses until it’s too late. He’s always been good with Shane, or maybe Shane has just never seemed to have a limit to what he’ll take from Ilya’s teasing. He’s never felt like he stepped too far.

So he doesn’t understand what he’s done when he watches the smile wash down Shane’s face, watches Shane’s expression crumble on its foundations to nothing. Shane looks away when he starts blinking hard, first at the ceiling, but doesn’t find what he’s looking for there. A few more furious seconds, and he leans his head heavily back onto the couch, slides his eyes closed, a little hot line dripping out from under his lashes.

Ilya is helpless. Doesn’t know what has happened, just that he’s broken something.

“Shane?”

Shane shakes his head the tiniest bit, presses his lips hard together. Then, abandons his phone to his lap and covers his face with his hands, palms shoved against his eyes.

Ilya scrambles up from where he’s splayed out, reaches for Shane, even if he doesn’t know if that’s what Shane wants. He doesn’t understand how he’s fucked up, only that he has. He runs a hand through Shane’s hair, and Shane makes a choked little noise.

“Shane, I’m sorry,” Ilya says. “I didn’t mean it. Shane...”

He’ll take it all back, marriage and Yuna and all of these little tethers he thought he was getting away with plunging into Shane’s marrow, all of the ways he has been desperately trying to bind them together, keep part of Shane inside him, give part of himself to Shane, melt the two of them into one. He’ll separate it all, tear it out of where it’s already tucked so precious in his heart, and it’ll bleed him until there’s nothing left. But he’ll do it, if it’s not what Shane wants, after all.

Shane rattles out a shaky breath. He reaches for Ilya's hand in his hair, and Ilya stills even that, if even that much is not allowed of him anymore. He'll give it back, if he has to. It was too much for him to hope for, probably. He should have maybe seen it coming. He should have maybe known Shane would examine what Ilya is offering a little too closely and figure out, finally, that he could do better.

Shane's hand closes around Ilya's wrist, and then Shane is yanking Ilya toward him, or throwing himself toward Ilya, and they end up half collapsed on the couch, Shane's dark, trembling head pressed into the cocoon of Ilya's shoulder and neck, soaked breath hot and thin against Ilya's collarbone. He fists hands in Ilya's tank top and breathes and breathes, like the air isn't coming to him fast enough, and gasps out:

"I can't go back. I don't want to go back."

Ilya feels immediate, earth-shaking relief; the force of it knocks the wind out of his lungs, sends his heart careening around his rib cage. No, no, Shane still wants him, Shane still *loves* him, all of Ilya's ugly, desperate, needy desire. It's the other thing, the other side of that, which Ilya feels too. Dark clawing in the back of his mind when he looks too closely at the happiness he feels, here with Shane in this apartment, this other world of theirs. It's the wanting too much. It's the impossibility of it, festering like rot underneath the pristine, gleaming surface. It has just hit Shane here first, full-force, sitting on this couch together.

"Shane..."

"How am I supposed to live without you now?" Shane is saying, voice reedy and a little hysterical. "What am I supposed to do?"

An insane part of Ilya wants to laugh at Shane asking him this question. What is Shane supposed to do? What is *Ilya* supposed to do?

He has been feeding on this glut of temporary happiness, this fearsome euphoria growing and growing inside of him, metastasizing throughout his body, and ignoring that there is an inevitable end, a limit, and it has snuck up on him so fast, so fast, how completely dependent he is on it now. Living off Shane's love, breathing only his oxygen, and he's not acclimated to the before and the will-be-again anymore. He's flown out into the atmosphere without a spacesuit, drawn in by Shane's gravity, and he's going to burn up and die on the reentry.

Ilya presses his lips to the dark thicket of Shane's hair, runs his fingers through it, and then his own resolve breaks and he is also fending off furious, pathetic tears tracking down his face.

He wants to say, *Don't leave. Stay with me, forever. I love you, I love you so much, we can figure something out. We can do something so we don't ever have to be apart.*

But that's just his own desperation talking, just his petty attempt to bargain with fate. So he just mumbles Shane's name against his hair, whispers little imaginary pet names that until now, he's kept locked deeply inside.

"Oh Shane... Shanya... my Shane..."

“We’ve been really stupid,” Shane chokes out, somewhere beneath him. His voice is thick with snot and tears. Ilya doesn’t know if he’s ever heard Shane sound like he’s fighting himself so hard before. “Fuck, we’ve been so stupid. It was easier when we didn’t say it out loud.”

No, Ilya thinks. No, that’s not true. Ilya forgot how to sleep when he thought Shane would never talk to him again. He made an enemy out of the most innocuous things, and the enemy was stronger than him— a tweet with Shane and Rose Landry’s names in it could send him into a death spiral. That entire time, he never once said it out loud, even in his head, even to himself. And still, still, he was dying, flayed apart, roasting on the spit of his own hot, brittle, unrequited devotion to Shane Hollander.

“Not for me,” Ilya says.

Shane breathes in, not so much a breath as a shaky sob of an inhale, and shifts from inside Ilya’s embrace to wipe his eyes hard with the palms of his hands. He rolls his head to the outside of Ilya’s neck, lips grazing his shoulder, his face hot and slick against Ilya’s skin.

“Yeah,” he says. Another wheezed breath in. “No, it was pretty fucking miserable.”

Ilya tilts Shane’s head up with his fingers, kisses him, like he can right Shane’s breathing and his own this way, push the air from out of his lungs and directly into Shane’s. He tastes brine and desperate spit and feels like he’s drowning. Drowning, of course he would think of drowning. He keeps trying to die here. He would rather that than have to give this up.

Shane grips into him and pulls him down over top, Shane falling back against the cushions and Ilya a tangle above him, tethered to his mouth, smearing around the wetness all over Shane’s cheeks and his own until it’s one mess, one misery. He breaks away and Shane pulls him back down again, chases him back into his own mouth, tongue alive and a wild thing searching for him. Ilya lets him bruise his lips and pry them apart and sink between them.

Ilya has only been saying the words out loud for a short time. *I love you* is still unfamiliar to his tongue, a language he hasn’t practiced enough. But he’s been speaking it fluently with his body for far longer, sinking the words into Shane and kissing them along his spine and spelling them out with fingers that know perfectly how to pronounce them. It’s a language that he and Shane both speak, the two of them alone, better than anyone. Of course it’s still what they both reach for, now, when their throats are too tight to say it any other way.

Ilya rucks up Shane’s sweatshirt and runs his hand rough across Shane’s chest, his nipple, digging in with his fingernail where it points up under Shane’s white tee. “Fuck,” Shane breathes, tearing at his own clothes, pulling them up over his head as quickly as he can manage. “More, fuck, Ilya.”

Everything, everything, Ilya wants it all. It will take so much longer than this perfect week to keep Ilya from feeling fucking insane every time he gets to have Shane like this. Years of careful study would still not be enough.

Ilya bends down and sucks Shane’s nipple into his mouth, bites down with his teeth, until it hardens helplessly from the assault. He pulls back to admire his work, to watch the string of

thick spit follow his lips and connect them to Shane's chest. He palms it while he sucks Shane's other nipple until it's just as hard and dark and pushing back up against his tongue when he licks over it. So beautiful, the way Shane's body proudly displays the fruits of Ilya's labor on it. The way Shane loves him.

Shane's hands are in Ilya's hair and his strong thigh is between Ilya's legs, grinding into him, and already Ilya feels almost gone from it, could come like this, overwhelmed against Shane's body. He doesn't know what's happened to him, he feels unmoored when he fucks Shane now. Like the only thing that was keeping his resolve intact, before, was that he didn't say out loud that he loved him, and speaking the words has blown him wide open. And now every time he touches Shane it feels ruinous, like slipping into a chasm he can't climb out of. He wants to fall so much deeper, so much deeper. He wants to drag Shane down with him.

"Not here, Ilya," Shane says, voice a desperate rasp.

"Maybe I can't control myself," Ilya says, between another bruise sucked into Shane's tit. "Maybe I have to fuck you here." He palms over the wet bulge in Shane's pants, where his cock is leaking so much for him already. Fuck, he wants to taste it, suck it out of Shane like venom, take the poison into himself.

"Not on the couch," Shane moans, "want you to mess me up."

Ilya has to pause and think very hard about not coming against Shane's thigh. "*Fuck*, Shane." He rears back, pulls them both upright. Shane's face is wet and red and his mouth is loose and open. Ilya is sure he looks more or less the same.

"Come on."

Shane throws him against the doorway before they make it to the bed, puts his teeth to Ilya's neck and sucks hard, like he's trying to get at Ilya's carotid. He bites against Ilya's lips, moans for Ilya's tongue, whines and pants and grinds their cocks against one another through their ruined clothes.

"I need you, Ilya, fuck, please, I fucking need you..."

"Show me," Ilya says, though he feels completely out of control. He's just as desperate and wanting as Shane.

Shane drops to his knees, the way that always makes Ilya come apart, how quickly he moves to take Ilya's cock into his mouth, how hungry he is for him. Ilya's cock is red and hot, and Shane's tongue is red and hot, perfectly suited for each other. Shane's wet eyes stare up at him as he hollows out his cheeks, fills his mouth with spit for Ilya to fuck into better.

"That's right, Shanya. Get it wet for me. I want to slide it right in when I fuck your ass. Make it so I don't even have to touch you first. So good, Shane."

He pulls Shane off when he can't stand it anymore, when the need to fuck him is so great that Ilya feels like an animal, like he'll go crazy if he doesn't feel Shane's ass tight and hot and greedy around him.

“Go. Get on the bed.”

Shane goes down on all fours, his ass up for Ilya, so obedient it makes Ilya fight the threat of tears again. What has he done to deserve this gift, this man who offers his body and his enormous heart so willingly for Ilya to do with as he sees fit? How is he so lucky? He will pay some great price for this, someday. Soon, probably. He can feel fate bearing down on him, every day that he steals with Shane in this unearned honeymoon.

Shane stops Ilya as he's heading for the nightstand to retrieve the condoms and lube. “Wait. Wanna feel you. Want your come inside me.”

Fuck. Ilya has never done this before, not with Shane, not with anyone. He brought condoms out for even his most self-destructive and laissez-faire Moscow nights. But he's fucking thought about it, stripped his cock thinking of painting Shane white from the inside, watching his cum leak out of Shane's trembling hole. Leaving behind the evidence in Shane's body of the depths of Ilya's love for him. So Shane, so Ilya, so anyone could see. This body, this man, this soul belongs to Ilya. *His*.

And now Shane is begging for it, ass up and waiting to be claimed by him.

“Fuck, Shane. Okay.”

Shane's face is pillowed in his arms and his moan echoes in the cavern he's made for himself there when Ilya climbs onto the bed and takes his ass in both hands, spreads it wide, licks a hot stripe down the cleft and over his asshole, covering it and himself and the bedsheets with spit where it dribbles down and pools beneath them.

“Oh, god, Ilya, I need it, I fucking need you, please...”

Ilya fucks into him with his tongue, opens him up beneath his mouth, sucking at his hole. Now that Shane has said it, Ilya wants it all to come from him— spit and cum and Shane's own desperation for lube. He wants nothing between them, nothing artificial, wants the alchemy of his and Shane's body to catalyze on just their own juices.

Ilya is shaky when he lines himself up behind Shane, skin to Shane's skin, smears the bead of precome pearling at the tip of his cock right up against Shane's hole. He aches with the desire to sink in, close in all the space between them. Still, he asks, he needs to make sure it's what Shane wants, that the bruise he's worrying into his bottom lip and the furrow in his brow is from anticipation and not regret.

“Is it okay?”

Shane gropes behind him, finds Ilya's hand where it's gripping maybe too hard into Shane's hip, wraps his fingers around it, joins them together.

“Please, Ilya. Please.”

Ilya comes apart.

The first raw thrust inside, the burning velvet grip of Shane's ass around him as he buries himself, the moan Shane cries into the crook of his own bracketed arm, his hand squeezing so hard around Ilya's that it hurts. It's too much. He feels shattered, smashed into a million pieces. He folds over Shane, presses his damp forehead to the line of Shane's spine, and breathes, unmoored. Floats like the world's turned over and he's suspended suddenly from the ceiling. He shuts his eyes and feels blood rush and sweat drip and saliva pool, and turns his head further into Shane's hot skin, rests his cheek against him, and thinks *I love you, I've loved you forever and I will love you forever.*

Shane trembles underneath him and around him. He contracts helplessly around Ilya, shudders out another low moan, clutches into the bedsheets with his free hand. His voice is unrecognizable, thick from crying, scratchy and bottomed out.

"Oh my god, Ilya, fuck... I feel everything, it's so fucking good, baby, you feel so fucking good..."

Ilya lets the words wash over him, settle in his chest, spur him to move, little thrusts that he knows are not the limit of what Shane can take, of course, but may be the limit of what he can give, testing his own resolve, afraid that he will turn to nothing if he fucks into Shane the way he aches to right now.

He presses a kiss to Shane's strong, tensing back. "Shane." Another kiss, lets his lips drag behind. His teeth trace a pattern in Shane's sweat. "Shanya." He moves his hips, pulls halfway out, feels bereft of Shane's heat with just that much, drives back in. "Love you, I love you, Shane." Again, in Russian, escaping from the very heart of him. "*Ya tebya lyubyu... Ya tebya lyubyu.*"

Slowly, like learning to walk on the moon, or diving to the bottom of the ocean, Ilya acclimates, inures himself to the pull of Shane's impossible gravity, just enough to start to pump himself out and back in, enough to rear back and take in all of the sight beneath him, truly see Shane there for the first time: splayed out for him, beautifully wrecked, arched and taut and more perfectly formed than any masterpiece any French king has ever hung in his palace, gleaming more brightly in Ilya's eyes than any work of art, his Mona Lisa, his Winged Victory, his grand hall of mirrors. Shane, his Shane, his alone.

Ilya rocks back onto his heels, spreads his legs apart and pulls Shane up to straddle them, his hand going to Shane's jaw, closing around his throat, pressing Shane into his body. Shane's hands go back and sink into Ilya's hair and he throws his head back against Ilya's shoulder, his Adam's apple straining against Ilya's fingers where they brush over it. His cock is wet and dipping into the flat plane of his stomach, leaking with want, so red that it's probably killing him, how much he wants to come. So fucking beautiful, Ilya will never get enough of looking at him. He is in awe of him, he loves him so much it's debilitating, it will render Ilya insane. He feels that way now, like every thrust into Shane's perfect body peels away a layer of Ilya's sanity. His fingers close a little tighter around Shane's throat and Shane's breath hitches. He turns his head, nosing into Ilya's cheek, searching for him. Ilya finds his mouth and kisses him desperately, rabidly, licking along his lips and clashing with Shane's tongue.

He's so close, tattered and fraying at the edges, barely cognizant of anything except Shane's tight ass and his loose, wet mouth and his burning skin under Ilya's fingers, doesn't think he

can handle one more thrust, one more moan breathed into his mouth, one more hot tear tracking its way down Shane's cheek. And Shane looks just as destroyed, just as devastated, his stomach soaked with his own precome, pilloried and outspread against Ilya's chest. Ilya covers him with his hands, touching everywhere, kisses and kisses him; he can't stop touching him with his fingers and his mouth, every part of him so precious, so beloved that it feels like he can't possibly convey it, even with the furious pistoning of his hips, even with the way his body is shaking against Shane's, even with the way he whispers senselessly into Shane's mouth, along his lips, in every language he knows.

"Don't leave me," Shane chokes out, "stay with me, forever."

"Never," Ilya says, "never. I won't."

And Shane rears back as his orgasm rockets through him, and Ilya feels it everywhere, hotter and closer around him than ever before, waves and waves of it like he can feel the individual nerve endings and the cells of Shane's body, raw against him, and he buries himself as deep as he can go, and fills Shane up to the brim, can feel it gushing out as he fucks into the wetness until he's completely spent. Then, collapses them both into the mattress, unable to do anything but pull ragged breaths from the deepest part of his lungs and bury his face into the damp contours of Shane's neck.

This love will kill him someday, he thinks. It will consume him and swallow him whole. Love like this is not meant to be survived. Good. That's what he wants. That's what it means to love someone this much, at least to Ilya, at least when you're this fucked up. That's what it means.

Shane begins to stir, like he means to move out from under Ilya, and Ilya presses him back down with shaky hands.

"Ilya..."

"Don't move. I want to see."

Shane moans a little, slides his eyes shut, like he can't handle hearing Ilya say it and look at him at the same time. "Fuck."

Ilya carefully spreads Shane apart, mouth going slack at what he sees. Shane's hole is purpled, almost bruised, open and wet. A little river of translucent white dribbles out of it, hot against Ilya's fingertips as he traces reverently over it, catches the trickle and works it back inside, his fingers slipping in so easily.

Shane sucks in a breath, draws his eyebrows together like it hurts, overstimulated, maybe. "Ilya, don't..."

"Can you feel it?" Ilya's fingers come away sticky, and he fingers Shane's rim with the cum he dug out of his hole, just to see Shane writhe for it. "I gave you so much. You will probably be leaking for days."

"Jesus Christ, Ilya."

“I want to do it so much that you will still feel me here even when you get on the plane back to Montreal. So you can’t ever forget.”

Shane shifts beneath him, reaches out with his hand, for whatever purchase he can find on Ilya’s body. “How can you say something like that and not kiss me?”

It turns out that Ilya can’t. He gathers Shane up against him, arranges them carefully on the mess of sheets until he can cradle Shane’s head in his elbow and kiss him and kiss him, so long that he loses track of time around them, kisses him even when Shane’s tears silently return, kisses him until they dry.

Fate comes hours later in the form of a phone call, when Ilya and Shane are tucking in to sleep. Ilya has been expecting it, though he didn’t know how it would come. The temperance that is always knocking on the door of his joy, sneaking into his life like an uninvited party guest. The shoe was always going to drop. It was just a question of when.

“I will take this,” Ilya whispers against Shane’s ear, puts a soft kiss there, too, so that is what Shane will be left thinking about. Shane is still awake, but well on his way out, eyes closed and face mashed into the pillow in a way that will leave adorable lines on his cheek in the morning if Ilya doesn’t twist him around to cradle him into his chest instead. On other nights, that is probably how this would go.

But Ilya gets up and walks out of the bedroom, and stares at Alexei’s name on his screen like the omen it is. He connects the call, and pretends he can stop what’s happening, what he already knows is coming. What he’s probably known all week, but has been somehow allowed to delay for a brief stint in paradise.

«What the fuck do you want, Alexei?» he says, and the venom feels good, even though it’s pointless. Even though he already knows what Alexei is calling to tell him.

The call is brief, perfunctory. Drawing out the news does not accomplish anything. The spot in the bed where Ilya had been lying is still warm, probably. He could slot right back in there, run his hands down Shane’s back until he is well and truly asleep, and drape himself over his body and delay the inevitable even more.

“Ilya? Is everything okay?”

Shane is standing in the threshold between the bedroom and the living room, all the beloved angles of him cast in shadow. Ilya wonders how he must have sounded on the phone to draw Shane out of bed like this. Like a howling animal with its foot trapped in a snare, probably. He’s suddenly sorry, so sorry, for making him get out of bed. For ruining all of this. Fucking it all up, as if there was any other outcome to be had. As if his father’s voice, which could reach all the way to the front door from anywhere in the house without needing to be raised, wouldn’t get the last laugh after all. *Welcome home, Ilyushka. Looks like your little party is over.*

Ilya looks at Shane, his beautiful face, beautiful in its not knowing any of this for one final moment.

“My father is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately, a Plot has arrived at the Airbnb 😭

Thank you thank you thank you for reading and for all your comments so far <3 Please drop a kudos / comment on this chapter if you're picking up what we're putting down here, yes I am greedy for more comments, I'm sorry (not sorry)! See you back next week!

Come find me on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](#) in the meantime.

Chapter 9: If you can stay, remain; leave, if you must

Chapter Summary

Ilya goes home.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from *The Voyage*, by Baudelaire

(Also, peep the new chapter count! The final chapter got too huge and now it's two.)

► CW for this chapter:

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

“Ilya, I’m so sorry.”

Shane has stumbled out of bed with nothing on but his boxers, holding himself loosely like he’s chilly out of the blankets. He looks so warm and inviting that Ilya wants to collapse against him, melt into his broad body and go boneless and dead-weight against him. Shane would hold onto him, keep him from falling to the ground, though Ilya doesn’t think he deserves it.

Shane looks sorry too, his expression pinched and curled in on itself in shock and concern. Ilya hates that look. Hates that Shane is the one saying he’s sorry, when it’s Ilya who should be saying it. Sorry for having a family that won’t let them even have this. Sorry for promising Shane that he would never leave him, never, and then immediately proving himself a liar.

Ilya doesn’t know what to say to him. He would have to know how he feels right now, probably, to know what to say, and he doesn’t. It’s strange, how something can be a shock and also be exactly what you expected, what you knew was coming. He knew his father was going to die, even before Paris, probably knew it the first time Grigori forgot his mother was no longer alive, years ago. He knew it was going to happen sooner, rather than later, once he no longer seemed to have the lucidity to call Ilya up and berate him on the phone anymore. Maybe he even knew it was going to happen this week, when he started getting Alexei’s calls with no voicemails and no texts, as if what Alexei needed to tell him was something for which he couldn’t leave any evidence behind.

But he’d thought– wished, hoped– Paris would happen first. Thought that since the volcano was granting him all of his deepest desires anyway, it would cast a little spell of protection over him for as long as he stayed here.

But actually, it's the other way around, isn't it? If he was in Boston right now, if he had never come to Paris at all or had left with his team and the volcano had borne down over the Atlantic only after he was safely tucked back in his big house stateside, he would not have been able to travel for his father's funeral. He would not have had to manage it, other than directing someone he trusted where to send the payments. It seems like acts of god only grant one kind of protection, at the expense of another. Yes, that sounds right. It sounds like the kind of mischief that trickster gods get up to when they meddle in mortal lives.

So as payment for the dream he's been living in Paris, now he must face the nightmare of Moscow.

He is silent for so long that Shane thinks Ilya must be waiting for him to speak again.

"We need to get to Russia, right? Your family is in Moscow?" Shane crosses the room now, puts his hands on Ilya's biceps and squeezes in. "There's gotta be a train that goes there from Paris, right? They're major cities. Fuck, imagine if you weren't in Europe right now. That's lucky, I guess. Sorry, not lucky, that's not the right word."

Lucky. That's what he's thought all week, how lucky he is that they are here. This is the first time he's felt any differently. He's so far down this train of thought that it takes him a moment to catch up to the rest of what Shane has said.

We need to get to Russia.

We.

"Shane."

Shane crosses to the kitchen and picks up a sweater that Ilya has left hanging off of one of the bar stools and shrugs it on. Ilya's sweater. Before Paris, Ilya had given Shane his clothes to wear when he came over that disastrous afternoon in Boston, and it had felt like he was getting away with something devious when Shane put them on. Now, after everything that's happened between them, all it means is Shane is cold, and Ilya's clothes are there. It's unconscious. It's what lovers do. Of course this is the kind of miracle that comes with a price. Ilya's known that all along, that he could not get this kind of devastating happiness completely for free.

Maybe that's what Shane means by *we need to get to Russia*. Maybe that is unconscious, too. Maybe he said *we* but he means *you*, because of course he can't mean *we*. Of course Shane can't go to Russia with him. Of course Ilya must face his family alone.

"Let me get my phone and I'll look up trains for tomorrow for us," Shane says, already crossing back to the bedroom, like he has to move fast into action, get things going for them, but Ilya is still standing exactly where he was, by the terrace doors, by the Eiffel Tower. And now he knows it wasn't unconscious, that Shane said *we*. He means to include himself. And now Ilya has to say something, even though it is the last thing he wants to say.

"Shane."

Shane turns. He looks at Ilya with that worried frown, which turns to something else when he sees Ilya's expression, into something like anger.

"Ilya, no. I'm coming with you."

"Shane."

"I'm coming *with* you, Ilya. Are you serious right now?" He crosses his arms, widens his stance a little, like he's bracing for an impact. "I'm not going to stay here and let you go to Russia alone."

"Shane, it is not that simple."

"Yes it is," Shane says, with a tone of voice that should probably piss Ilya off, that in any other circumstances would probably make Ilya raise his voice right back.

Shane is his most obstinate when he has no fucking idea what he's talking about. So many things get to be simple to Shane and not to Ilya. Shane's family is simple, their problems and their joys and their love. Shane doesn't understand what it's like on the other side of that, probably can't understand it, the way you can't fully picture what it's like to break a bone when you never have before. Or get shot with a gun. There are many things, terrible things, that must be experienced firsthand to really understand. Things like the way the light and love can go out of a family, like a candle that gets blown out on a twelve-year-old's birthday cake, and how you still have to keep living in the darkness, after.

Shane can't possibly understand these things, and Ilya doesn't think he's strong enough to show them to him. He can't. Shane has to stay here, and Ilya has to go.

"You can't come with me, Shane."

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Shane says, closing in on Ilya, getting in his face like he's about to throw his gloves down and toss him into the boards. "You don't get to do this, okay? I'm coming with you. I'm not leaving you alone. I'd fucking... how can you think I'd even be able to sit here and wait for you like that?"

He puts his arms up and Ilya, irrationally, thinks Shane really might hit him, flinches at it. But instead, Shane throws them around Ilya's shoulders and pulls him tight against him, buries his face into Ilya's neck.

"I love you, Ilya. I love you. I can't let you go alone. I couldn't live with myself if I did." He presses a kiss against Ilya's shoulder, which has gone cold, standing bare in the living room for so long. Shane's lips are warm. "If you think I'll be a burden or whatever—"

Ilya snorts at this, that Shane thinks he is the burden, not the other way around. He finds his hands pulling tight around Shane's waist, bringing him closer, not away. He's so pathetic. So weak. That he needs this so much. That he can't do what he has to, for Shane's sake, because it's too painful.

“-- you don't have to worry about me at all, while you're there, I know you'll have a lot going on. But I can't let you go alone, and sit here and worry so fucking much if you're okay. I would lose my fucking mind. So we're going together. I'm going with you.”

Ilya screws his eyes tightly shut, but his lashes already feel wet, another weakness. Shane finds his mouth and his warm lips close soft and gentle on Ilya's.

“Okay?”

Ilya sniffs, trying to claw back the tears, feels his lip trembling with the effort. Hates himself for it. That he's going to allow this, that it's the worst fucking idea, that he needs Shane so desperately. That he doesn't actually think he can go to Moscow alone, in the wake of Paris. He's sunk in too deeply, has burrowed himself too far into Shane and has allowed Shane to take root inside him, too far, too systemically, all the little parts of him spread throughout Ilya, carried along the blood pumping through his heart, outward to every extremity, inward to his core. It's just not possible to extricate themselves anymore.

“I have to call Svetlana,” he says finally.

Shane puts his hands on Ilya's face, kisses him hard. He has the good sense not to look victorious, just concerned and maybe relieved.

“I'm going to find us tickets, okay?”

“Okay.”

Ilya makes the call from the other bedroom, his first time stepping foot inside of it. It's nice, of course, though no ensuite; it has the full hallway bath just outside the door. He pretends he's very interested in the ceiling medallions in here, too, while he waits for Sveta to pick up. It's early evening back home; it's possible Sveta is wrapping things up at work, or going out for drinks, and Ilya is already thinking about what he'll do if she doesn't answer her personal phone. Whether he has her work number saved anywhere. Whether she answers email.

She picks up. For him, she picks up.

«Ilyusha, I have no more favors for you until you send me the video you promised me,» Sveta says. «And I am so busy today. You will have to ask your sugar mama for help, I'm afraid.»

She sounds breezy and annoyed, but her annoyance is affected. She just wouldn't have picked up if she didn't want to speak to him. Ilya is not one of her clients; there is no financial incentive to humor him on the phone.

«Sveta. I...»

Sveta must be able to read from his tone that something has happened, because her voice is suddenly serious. «Ilyusha, what's wrong?»

He has just found out his father is dead, and he's already said as much out loud once. And now, twice. He wonders how many times he'll have to tell people after this, too. Many, many

more times, probably. He'll probably never have to stop saying it, won't be able to keep it hidden to himself the way he has with his mother's death. There are a handful of people who need to know about his mother, and all of them except Shane were there when she was alive. So for him, he'll probably only have to say it— *my mother is dead*— at least once more. For his father, he'll probably have to tell everyone— Coach, his teammates, the reporters once the news gets out. *My father is dead*. Or, *My father has passed away*. He'd better get used to saying it now, choosing the tone, deciding the wording. He might need his manager to draft a fucking press release, eventually.

But for Shane, for Sveta, they deserve their own way of hearing it from him.

«Ilyusha?»

«Papa is dead, Sveta.»

«Oh, no, Ilyusha...» Svetlana knows his father, so she doesn't say *I'm sorry*, or *how awful*, and Ilya is incredibly grateful for it. She says, instead: «Will you go?»

«Yes.»

She curses down the phone. «Why do you have to go, Ilya? It's going to be horrible.»

Ilya shakes his head for no one but himself. If only it was a question of whether or not he thought it would be *enjoyable*. Sveta should understand that, too.

«I have to bury him, Sveta. Alexei will do fucking nothing. Polina will do nothing. I have to do it.»

«Pack him in a box and drop him into the ocean, Ilyusha.»

«Sveta.»

«He didn't deserve you. He doesn't deserve it now. Sorry for speaking ill of the dead,» she says, and doesn't sound at all sorry.

«It's not about deserving or not deserving.»

Sveta sighs hard on the other end. «Sorry. Sorry, I'm just fucking angry. I hate that I can't go with you. There are no fucking flights. You know I would go, right? I would go with you in a heartbeat.»

«I know.»

«And I can't stand thinking about you having to do it all alone.»

Ilya stares at the closed door. He's standing in the dark, here, except for the city light that filters in where the curtains are drawn back from the window. He hasn't really noticed it until now, how dark it is. But it helps him when he speaks, says what he has actually called Svetlana to say.

«I'm not going alone.»

«Ilyusha, what do you mean? You can't be thinking of taking your Paris fling to Moscow with you.»

«Shane is going with me.»

Sveta takes a breath. «*Shane Hollander* is going with you.»

«...Yes.»

Svetlana is quiet for a long time.

«You've been with him the entire time, haven't you?»

«Yes.»

Svetlana is smart. It's one of the things Ilya appreciates about her the most. She's smart and she knows Ilya probably better, certainly longer, than almost anyone else. Sometimes, he hates that part, because he can't keep her from seeing the things he doesn't want her to see. Sometimes, he's grateful for it. He doesn't have to say everything out loud, lay it all out for her, can say just the parts he absolutely needs to and she will understand the rest.

«Ilyusha. That girl you always talked to lived in Montreal, didn't she?»

«Yes.»

And now Sveta laughs, and it sounds both sweet and sad, and terribly fond. «*Jane*, Ilyusha? You are not creative at all.»

Ilya lets out a breath that he thinks he may have been holding for years. His biggest secret and it's been told. Held, now, by someone other than just the two of them.

«He is going to need a visa.»

She sighs. «Don't worry, I'll get it for you. What time is it there?»

«Eleven PM.»

«You'll have it before noon tomorrow, even if I have to call Papa and ask him to pull strings. Thank god you're not dating a fucking Latvian, or my hands would be tied,» she laughs.

«Sveta,» he says. «Thank you.»

«Oh, Ilya. I wish I could do more,» she says, like she isn't already doing the impossible for him. For them. «I'm really... really glad you have him there. I'm so glad you won't be alone.»

He stares at the phone in his hand after he cuts the call, the bright spot in the darkness of this unfamiliar bedroom. Before he can talk himself out of it, he sends her the video he took of

himself and Shane on the ice. Then, he goes to join Shane back in their room.

Shane is sitting on the bed, squinting at his phone. He startles a little when Ilya walks in.

“Ilya. Hey.”

Ilya crawls across the bed to him, buries his face into Shane’s neck, where it’s warm, wrapped in Ilya’s sweater. Only when he’s gotten his fill, breathed Shane’s scent in deep and exhaled it out, does he turn his head, resting it on Shane’s shoulder, to read his screen.

“What did you find for us?” Ilya says.

“There’s only one direct train to Moscow, but the good news is it leaves tomorrow afternoon. We’ll get there late Friday night. Is that going to be okay?”

Ilya nods, which is mostly just a shrug against Shane’s shoulder. “Yes. Funeral will have to be Saturday.” He does the math in his head. Three days exactly, just in time. “Is good, we will not have to stay very long.”

“We can stay as long as you want,” Shane says. “I got us tickets there but no return yet.”

“Ah, I do not want to stay at all.” Ilya wraps his arms around Shane, sneaks them under the sweater. Shane’s skin is so warm on his cold hands. The curve of his hip fits so well in the grip of Ilya’s palm, made for him.

“You don’t have to decide right now,” Shane says, resting his head against Ilya’s.

“Okay.”

Ilya’s phone dings at his side. Svetlana’s little heart floats above the video in their text thread.

[Sveta]

«*Oh Ilyusha.*»

“I told Svetlana,” he says softly, staring at her message.

“Oh... Okay.”

“She figured it out. Once I said you would go to Russia with me.”

“Oh.” Ilya tightens his grip around Shane’s waist, waits for his breathing to hitch or his heart to pound hard enough for Ilya to feel it against him. But Shane just lets out a huffed little laugh. “I was thinking I would tell my parents that I’m going to Russia, but now I’m wondering if they will figure it out, too, if I do.”

“Probably they will not. Sveta knew about Jane. Do they know about Lily?”

“No.”

“I think you should tell them. So they will not worry about you.”

“They won’t know I even went anywhere.”

“Hm. Yes. But you know. If something happened.”

Shane kisses his forehead. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

Shane moves under Ilya’s hands, shifts around him, straddles Ilya’s lap with his big thighs on either side of Ilya’s legs. He puts his hands out on Ilya’s chest, like he’s using his body for leverage to sit up. He gazes down at Ilya in the low light, eyes dark and searching and beautiful, so beautiful.

“Listen. You don’t have to tell me anything, if you don’t want to. About your family, about whatever. You don’t have to talk about it. But I am really, really sorry about your dad, Ilya.”

Ilya reaches up to pull Shane down against him, wrap his arms around Shane’s back. Presses his face into the hollow of Shane’s neck, his collarbone. Breathes him in, breathes him out. He doesn’t speak, and Shane just cards fingers through his hair and doesn’t make him do anything else.

It doesn’t make sense to Ilya, why he cries then. Who it’s even for. Maybe it’s for his father, who doesn’t deserve it. Maybe it’s for Shane, who Ilya doesn’t deserve. Maybe it’s for himself. Someone else will have to decide if Ilya deserves the tears, in that case.

They stay that way for a long time, wrapped in each other, Shane a comforting weight across Ilya’s body. Ilya lets his head fall back against the headboard, lets his eyes close. Shane kisses him, softly wipes the tracks of his tears away. Another kiss, warmer, Shane’s hands cradling his face. Ilya moves slowly. He sinks his fingers into Shane’s hips, lets them rest there. One finger hooks gently into the waistband of Shane’s boxers, traces the imprint of the elastic left behind on his skin. Shane opens his mouth and Ilya accepts the invitation, slips his tongue between Shane’s lips.

He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to feel. He doesn’t know if he’s wrong to cry, wrong to not cry, wrong to hate his father and be relieved he’s dead and be sad that he’s dead all at the same time. Sad that this was the one family he had, the hand he was dealt, and it was a bad one, but he played with what he was given for as long as he could. And sad that even that is now gone, whatever little it was.

He brings his hand down to palm over Shane’s dick through his boxers, and Shane’s breath goes thin against Ilya’s mouth. Shane kisses Ilya’s jaw, his ear, his neck. He bucks against Ilya’s hand, moans into Ilya’s mouth when Ilya pulls his dick out of his underwear, then his own, slots them against each other in one hand.

Ilya will tell Shane about his family. He has to, he knows he does. But not tonight. It’s too raw, still. It is too hard to separate the facts, the story, from the shell shock Ilya feels from hearing Alexei hiss down the phone, *Papa is fucking dead, Ilya*. Maybe tomorrow, he will feel differently. Maybe he will be able to hold Shane in his arms, watching the cities and towns and kilometers pass by their train window, and tell him then.

But tonight, he's going to take the gift Shane is offering him now, the gift to think about anything else. He is going to lose himself in the ecstasy of Shane's body and put the rest of the world out of his mind entirely.

Ilya brings his hand up to spit into it, then wraps it back around their cocks, Shane burning against him. The jerk off is sticky and a little rough until Shane leaks enough to really wet them both, and then it's a wonderful slide of hot skin against hot skin, of Ilya's hand and fingers pulling a slow orgasm out of Shane first and then himself, spilling between them and over his fist. Shane kisses him and kisses him, until their mouths are more or less just swaying against each other, tired and nearly sore but unwilling to break away.

They are still awake, rinsed off and sprawled back in the bed, when Sveta texts Ilya a location east of them in the city.

[Sveta]

«Tomorrow 9AM»

«Have Hollander bring his passport»

«Cash or bitcoin if you have it»

"Tomorrow we will go get you visa first thing," Ilya says, as he texts back *«Thank you»*.

Shane nods, nosing into the space he's carved out over the last week against Ilya's chest, over his heart. He's falling asleep, maybe not even hearing him. Ilya sets an alarm on the phone, carefully returns it back to the charger, straining with his free arm so he doesn't jostle Shane out of his position.

He's still there, staring at the back of his eyelids, when his alarm goes off a few hours later. Shane groans against him, turns his head into Ilya's chest, like he's trying to bury himself inside of him. Ilya wishes they had time for anything, wishes he could pretend that this day would go slow and languid like all their other days in Paris, wishes that he didn't have to tear them away from this big, soft bed, tear himself away from Shane's firm, warm body.

But he has to, and he does. He nudges Shane gently off of him, and they speed through their morning routine. By seven thirty, they are on the road, one last joyride for the Porsche before he has to call Boris and have it picked up, even though Ilya feels rather joyless. Even though the rest of the day is going to be spent on the phone, trying to make funeral arrangements from three thousand kilometers away, which will involve paying the right people to make it happen, then paying the people who he gets told to call next, then paying a few more fucking vultures who will surely stick their hands out along the way. The difference between *he isn't here right now* and *let me get him for you* is more or less ten thousand rubles.

He will handle it, anyway. He always does.

Shane still hasn't texted his parents by the time they are at Gare de L'Est station, milling around while they wait for the train to arrive. It's just, he doesn't know how. He doesn't know what to say. He's thought of a few different sentences, each with varying degrees of specificity, deliberately vague wording. *Hey guys, just wanted to let you know I'll be in Russia for a couple of days!*— would definitely earn him an instant phone call from one worried parent or the other. *Hey guys, Ilya's father died and I'm going with him to Moscow for the funeral!*— feels like he's revealing too much about Ilya's personal life, and might still result in a frantic phone call anyway. He doesn't know how to avoid the phone call. So he just hasn't told them yet.

He will, though, when he thinks of what to say. He probably will.

He's barely spoken with Ilya since this morning, since the decidedly sketchy office in a decidedly sketchy part of town. Shane had stood unexpectedly for a photo and handed his passport over when Ilya had told him to, certain that he was never going to get it back, though it was returned thirty minutes later with a document in Russian stapled to it. Shane assumed it was a visa. Ilya had seemed satisfied with it, at least.

After that, though, Ilya had spent the whole morning and afternoon on phone calls, at varying volumes, but never sounding all that happy. Shane doesn't suppose it's the kind of event where you laugh on the phone, though. Ilya had only taken a break from the phone to furiously pack, swiping all of his toiletries into his bag without even trying to keep them separate from his clothes or whatever gross stuff was rolling around in Ilya's luggage. It had broken Shane's heart a little bit. He would have helped him, if Ilya had asked. He would have packed them carefully in his toiletry bag with his own toothbrush and dental floss.

Now, in the main terminal, the giant schedule board hanging high overhead, Ilya is on the phone again, and keeps looking over to Shane with an expression Shane can't read. He looks upset, maybe at the world. Shane hopes it's the world, and not him. He has an irrational thought, that all of Ilya's phone calls today have been about managing Shane's presence in Moscow with him. That being here has complicated everything Ilya has to do ten times more. That is probably not what's happening, though. It would be nice if Shane could talk to him soon. If he could ask.

"I'm gonna go in there," he says to Ilya, pointing at a convenience store kiosk. Ilya nods absently, Russian flying out of his mouth into the phone, turns away, glares up at the schedule like it's part of the problem.

Shane grabs a bunch of less-bad options for snacks and drinks: unsalted mixed nuts, to-go salads, still water. Then, against his better judgment, grabs some grosser stuff, chips and Orangina and some croissants that will probably leak grease into his backpack but he thinks might make Ilya smile a little when he sees them. It's fine, it won't kill them to eat a little shitty on the train, probably. There are mitigating circumstances, pretty fucking big ones, deaths in the family are more or less the biggest mitigating circumstances there can be. And he would rather Ilya eat garbage than eat nothing, right now. Shane doesn't think he's seen Ilya eat much at all today. Thinking about it, he purchases another croissant.

He also gets a deck of cards, a French sports magazine, and another one for car enthusiasts, though Ilya won't be able to read it. At least he can leaf through the pictures. At checkout,

there is one of those stands of tourist-trap magnets with all the usual hits: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc d'Triomphe, a basket with two alarmingly realistic baguettes peeking out of it. Shane grabs one shaped like the Eiffel Tower and stuffs it into his pocket immediately after he pays for everything, like he's embarrassed for himself.

Ilya has migrated to a seating area, still gesturing into the air as he talks on the phone. Shane sits down next to him, his suitcase between his knees, his backpack propped up on top of it. Ilya's hand comes down for a brief moment on Shane's knee and squeezes, then drops away before anyone can find the action suspicious. Shane feels warm and slightly thrilled all the same.

The phone call takes the entire length of time until their train's platform assignment lights up on the board. Ilya hangs up as they are rising to their feet, pushing into the divot between his eyebrows with his thumb.

"Headache?" Shane says. He wonders if he should go back into the convenience store and grab some acetaminophen.

"It is all headache," Ilya says. He grips into Shane's neck, just under the collar of his shirt, and uses it to steer them down the escalator to platform eleven.

Shane bought the nicest, most expensive tickets he could find for the RZD Moscow Direct train, thirteen-hundred euros a piece, private car with full ensuite bathroom. What that means, in train speak, is an upscale but very tiny cabin with an even tinier bathroom attached. The bed is flush against one wall, beside it a cramped little table and a built-in booth of a chair on its other side. The suitcases, apparently, go under the bed. Everything is very red and gold. The writing in the room, on the little wall placards, is all in Russian. Shane feels a bit like he has already crossed the border, just stepping into the cabin and putting his bags down.

He perches on the edge of the bed as Ilya falls heavily down across it, face down, heaving into the pillows with a big sigh. Ilya kicks his shoes off blindly, apparently satisfied when they fall clattering to the floor. He rolls onto his side, faces Shane, puts his arms out wide, beckoning with his hands, his bottom lip poked out in a theatrical pout.

"Come here."

Other than those two little squeezes in the train station, they haven't touched since they woke up in the morning. Shane feels hungry for it, even though that's crazy. He used to go months without touching Ilya, weeks without even speaking to him, sometimes. He feels like some kind of addict, the way he goes to him, the way the anxiety slides right off of him as Ilya wraps his big arms around him and buries his face in Shane's neck. He has the thought, brief and terrible, that he is going to have to get used to not having this again, somehow. That the articles said *as early as next week*.

But Ilya finds his mouth, kisses him with a little satisfied hum, and it's easy to put out of his mind. They only break away from each other to watch out of their large cabin window as the train pulls out of Gare de L'Est and begins its journey out of Paris, under the grey and urgently darkening evening sky.

Ilya does end up tearing into the croissants, apparently finding his appetite now that his affairs on the phone are in order. He looks at Shane with so much fondness when he pulls them out of his backpack that Shane feels himself turning red under his gaze.

“You are such a good husband to me,” Ilya says. Shane briefly wants it so badly to be true that it feels almost lethal.

Shane is delighted to find they have salmon on the dining menu. He gets two orders for himself via room service. Ilya orders a Milanese cake instead of actual food, and Shane doesn't even say anything about it. Mitigating circumstances.

It is pitch black outside the window long before they even finish dinner, before Ilya pulls Shane down onto the bed after and kisses a line down his neck to his stomach to his waistband, pulls his sweatpants down, and makes Shane come with his mouth wrapped around Shane's dick, joking about having his dessert like he didn't just eat cake instead of a real meal. Shane has to hastily stuff himself back into his clothes and move away from Ilya when the attendant knocks to come collect their plates, face a deep, incriminating red, Ilya smiling and being far too chatty with the young Russian girl taking their room service away, probably just to make her linger for longer and deepen Shane's mortification.

The room seems even smaller with no outdoor view to speak of, and the train slower. Shane pulls out the rest of the stuff he bought at the station.

“I got some magazines? And a deck of cards.”

“Show me cards,” Ilya says. Shane hands the deck over, watches Ilya take the cards out and absently shuffle through them, like he's checking if they've been tampered with. “What do you play?”

“My parents play poker,” Shane says. “So they taught me. Sometimes, I play with the guys on the team. Normally, just Texas Hold'em? Pretty typical stuff.”

“You are good?”

“I'm decent.”

Ilya smiles. “I can show you Russian card game, if you want. Is very fun.”

“Yeah?” Maybe Shane is a freak, because Ilya offering to show him anything makes his heart race and his dick stir a little. Maybe it's just that Ilya has never offered to show him things outside of the bedroom before. “What's the game?”

Ilya gestures for Shane to sit at the other side of the table. He starts pulling out cards, the twos through the fives of each suit, stuffing them back into the box.

“Is called *durak*.”

Ilya explains the rules, deals out the first hands face up so Shane can follow along. Shane likes the terminology, or at least the terminology Ilya chooses when he translates: attacker, defender, things Shane inherently understands. Ilya explains the trump suit, explains when to

draw, when you can drop your cards, when you have to pick cards up. It's important not to draw, but it's also important not to dump your trump cards haphazardly. Ilya doesn't explain that part of course, because he won't easily give out intel like that to an opponent, even when the opponent is Shane, even when the game is just cards. Shane picks it up from watching Ilya play through both face-up sets of hands, from Ilya saying *Okay, maybe I play this heart* when the pile to pick up is large and *Well, maybe I take these* when it's manageable.

"What does *durak* mean?"

"Means, like, fool," Ilya says. "You are called the *durak* when you lose the game. So you should learn how to pronounce this now, because I will be calling you *durak* a lot tonight."

"Sure, maybe if you fucking cheat."

"No, no, there will be no cheating. I am just very, very good at this game. Relax, I am not going to do anything bad to you, Shanya. Just beat you very badly at *durak*."

Shane grins. "I bet I fucking win. You can't beat me at anything."

Ilya's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh? Really? Who won first Stanley Cup?"

"I've won more."

"Who won first Hart?"

"I won Rookie of the Year."

"Yes, but I went first in the draft," Ilya says, the obvious trump card. He slides his foot up the hem of Shane's sweats. "Tell you what. We can bet on it, hm? We play to, say, five rounds? The winner makes the loser do whatever they want."

"I'll start thinking about what I want, then. Because I'm gonna win." Shane puts his hands on the table, already eager to play. Ilya just grins with all his teeth on display and deals them out.

Ilya wins. Not every game, Shane puts up a respectable effort, but Ilya wins overall. His foot is resting in Shane's lap under the table by the time they've finished round five, rubbing tiny circles against Shane's crotch with the heel of it. Shane already knows that Ilya is going to ask for sex, knew it probably before they even made the wager. Maybe if Shane were different, if he wasn't so eager already to do whatever Ilya wanted, this would be the time Ilya had him do something embarrassing, something he didn't like. But Shane has always liked everything Ilya does to him, everything Ilya makes him do. So Shane's reward and Ilya's reward always end up the same, no matter who wins these bets.

"Look at that," Ilya says, as he gathers the cards back into the box, "you talk so much shit, Shane Hollander, only to lose to me."

"You got lucky."

"Mm, yes. I am very lucky," Ilya says, which might have had more bite to it if they weren't en route to his father's funeral. He scoots up the bed, spreads his legs. "Come here, *durak*."

And Shane goes.

The landscape flying past their train window as Ilya wakes up is snowy, frost curving around the edges of the glass, icing a little halo around the view. It had been dark by the time they had passed through the first border and left France entirely; Ilya hadn't noticed when it happened. It was easy not to notice with Shane there, easy to leave his phone face-down and bury himself in Shane's body and laugh when the train lurched strangely and made Shane go stiff and briefly panicked.

This is the first time since boarding the train that Ilya has really remembered. Oh yes, they are heading to Russia. By tonight, they will be in Moscow. His father is dead, and he spent all of yesterday preparing everything else that comes after that, and now what's left is to cross another thousand kilometers of icy ground and face it himself.

Ilya lies completely still, his hands resting where they were when he woke, one splayed on the bed and one flat on Shane's back, hitched under the white tee he wore to sleep. He watches the white hills and occasional glimpses of roads and cars and thinks about how much Shane still needs to know if he's going to accompany Ilya anywhere tomorrow. And Ilya already knows he will; convincing Ilya to bring him to Russia was really the only challenge, and Ilya is embarrassingly aware of how little convincing that really took. He'd folded fast, had wanted to fold the minute Shane had pulled Ilya against him and said he'd be too worried to stay in Paris alone. So Ilya is going to have to find a way to speak out loud about his mother— of course first, his mother— and his father and his brother and all of it.

Even so, he considers how long he can delay. They will first have to wake up, get ready and dressed, order breakfast or hoof it to the dining car. They can and probably will have sex, because it's the best way Ilya knows how to put any inconvenience out of his mind for a while. It would be, primarily, a distraction; he doesn't even want to get off particularly badly this morning. He came three times in Shane's mouth last night, his reward for winning at cards, and by the end he was basically shooting dust and almost hungover from the exertion. Maybe Shane will let Ilya eat him out first thing, and he'll just occupy his mouth for a while that way, instead.

Ilya ends up dozing off until Shane wakes up, mentally checks off the thirty minutes or so he managed to delay any talk of uncomfortable topics. He licks into Shane's mouth, flips them over, fingers him open before Shane's even fully alert. He likes Shane any way he can get him, but he may like this version of Shane the best, because for so many years, it was completely out of his reach: sleepy and clingy and horny and barely awake, morning light making the brown of his eyes glitter as they slide slowly open, Ilya slicking up Shane's sleep-chapped lips with his tongue. He slides inside him raw and they barely move while they fuck, shallow jerks of his hips and pressing all his weight against Shane's cock so it grinds against his pelvis and gets them both sticky and wet. It shouldn't be enough to come from but it is, because it's Shane's body he can feel everywhere and Shane's hot dick making a mess of them both, and Shane can't help himself after, has to put his fingers down between his thighs

and feel where Ilya's cum is leaking out of his body. Ilya can't do anything but stare at him doing so, at his awed expression, like Ilya has given him something really important. Maybe he has.

Then the shower, not nearly large enough to fit them both, so they trade off and when it's not his turn Ilya flips through the pages of the car magazine that Shane bought and thinks about talking to Sveta about buying a Porsche when he gets back, fucking Shane in it the next time he comes to Boston, because that's now become a goal of his. Then the whole thought of that, of being back in Boston and Shane having to visit, instead of Ilya just rolling over in the morning and slipping inside him, makes him so sad that he goes to the ensuite and crowds Shane in the bathroom, annoying the shit out of him, just so he can rub it in his own sad face that Shane is still right here, close enough to touch whenever he wants.

They deliberate about breakfast; Ilya kind of wants to go to the dining car, because they won't have to talk about anything heavy there. Shane is worried that it isn't private enough, that someone will recognize them there. Ilya assures him that anyone in this class is too rich to bother either of them for a photo, even if they are recognized. It barely matters, in the end; there is one couple at the far end of the car, and they are old and mostly concerned with the landscape outside. They don't even look up at Shane and Ilya speaking in English. More than just a distraction, the whole endeavor is worth it to see how Shane looks at Ilya when he orders for them in Russian. Ilya has not really used Russian around Shane before, the last two days notwithstanding, but he may have to change that, if it gets Shane to look at him like he would start round two right now if they were alone.

He has sent everyone he can think of the itinerary for tomorrow. He even sent it to Sveta, so she could help him disseminate it. He doesn't expect Polina or Alexei to do any of that work. He irrationally hopes that no one shows up tomorrow, that he can somehow get away with the entire thing alone, that he won't have to speak to anyone, take condolences from any of his father's colleagues or Alexei's friends, but if he really wanted that to happen, he would not have enlisted Sveta's help. She and her father will ensure that a respectable number of people attend, people whose presence at these sort of things will invoke the right type of reputational currency that shouldn't matter anymore, because his father is fucking dead and can't spend it. But it would have mattered to him a lot, so Ilya will make sure it happens. Then, at least he can put his father in the ground knowing he gave him a great fucking funeral.

Ilya does a pretty good job of procrastinating, but he can't put it off forever. They are sitting on the bed together, Shane reading whatever it is on his phone that makes him worry his bottom lip between his two fingers, Ilya pointedly ignoring all the condolences that are starting to flood his inbox and his voicemail. Shane starts it off out of nowhere. "My mom says the Musée d'Orsay is a good museum."

"Yuna Hollander has not been wrong yet," Ilya says, then pauses. "She thinks you are in Paris right now?"

"Uh, yeah," Shane says, picking at the corner of his eye.

"You did not tell your parents you are going to Russia?"

Shane looks a little sheepish, glancing at him and then away. “No. I don’t know how to tell them without them freaking out about it.”

“So you will not tell them?”

“If I knew a way to tell them that didn’t involve you, maybe I would.” Shane seems to immediately understand how that lands, because he quickly follows up. “What I mean is, I don’t know how to tell them about this without, like, saying everything. And I want to tell them everything. Obviously. But they are going to freak out about it. Definitely about Russia. Maybe about you, too, I don’t know.”

Shane crawls across the bed to Ilya, leans his head into Ilya’s neck, splays his hand across Ilya’s chest to rub big, aimless circles with it.

“Sorry,” he says.

Ilya only understands one way that parents react to unexpected news about their children. Even when he was drafted first overall, his father had managed to make that something to be angry about, too. Boston had not been a good team before they had invested in rebuilding around Ilya, and that was somehow something his father could blame him for, that he was leaving the possibility of a KHL career— where he would be *forced out of his laziness*, where he would play *real hockey*— for a mediocre American team, for a league that would allow him to remain lazy and undisciplined. Ilya has a hard time believing that is the type of reaction Shane means by *freaking out*, not after the way Yuna Hollander reacted so graciously to having Ilya Rozanov thrown metaphorically into her lap yesterday. But maybe there are other ways that parents hurt their children, even when they don’t mean to.

“Do they freak out a lot? About you,” Ilya says.

“No,” Shane says, and laughs against Ilya’s skin. “Because I never tell them anything that would make them.”

“Like being gay.”

“Like being gay,” Shane agrees.

Ilya runs a hand through Shane’s hair, squeezes the back of his neck. Works his fingers around the other side of Shane’s jaw so he can tip him upward into a kiss.

“Come here,” he says, and pulls Shane into his arms, arranges them so Shane is laying back across him, his legs between Ilya’s legs, his head resting on Ilya’s collarbone. They can both watch the unfamiliar countryside fly past their window as they talk. Shane takes Ilya’s hands and holds them in his own.

“They would not be good about it?” Ilya says.

“I don’t know. Probably they would. But my mom. She would like, want to talk to the fucking brands about it.” Shane laughs. “She would want me to wear pride themed Reeboks or something.”

Ilya makes a theatrically shocked noise. “The horror.”

“She’d be telling me how much it matters that I’m the first gay and Asian hockey player to represent Rolex at Wimbledon or something. It’s just... It gets to be so much sometimes. And I know if I tell her, she’s going to get like that, and I just... I just figured it out for myself, you know? I’m not ready to, like, be the face of anything. I don’t want to be.”

It is almost alien to Ilya that Shane’s parents could care about him so much, are so invested in his career, that this could itself turn into a different kind of pain for Shane, a different thing to want to conceal himself from.

“Were your parents like that?” Shane asks suddenly. Or maybe, not suddenly, maybe this is how conversations about parents go, and Ilya is the odd man out, the one who takes direct questions about his family like a hit to the gut.

“No,” he says quickly.

Shane’s fingers tighten around his, like something in Ilya’s voice alarms him. The tightness in his jaw, the gravel of it around the word. Ilya is thinking of his father, at first, the implausibility of him ever having been invested in Ilya’s *career*, of considering hockey a career at all. That Ilya’s father would ever allow him such a self-indulgent way of thinking.

But Shane will not understand this, will think Ilya is speaking also about his mother. Will think his mother also did not care. And that misunderstanding will eat at Ilya, if he doesn’t correct it. If he doesn’t explain.

So he has to tell Shane about his mother.

“My mother died when I was young,” he starts. “I was twelve. So there was no career, brand deals, anything yet. I don’t know if she would have been like that.”

He doesn’t think so, but also he doesn’t know. He never had the chance with her to discover if her love could become overbearing, if he would have found himself keeping uncomfortable secrets from her, too. What kind of person would he have become, if so? These are not the sorts of questions Ilya lets himself entertain for long, just how different things might have been. So he talks, instead.

“She was a skater. She skated for Russia in the Olympics. She skated until she got pregnant with my older brother, and then my father made her stop. He said it was too dangerous. And then, even when she had him, he would not let her start again.”

There are videos online of his mother’s Olympic routine, which Ilya watches when it is not too painful to, when he can see her face at sixteen years old through grainy nineteen-eighties cameras and not be reminded of her face at thirty-eight, lips blue around the edges. In the videos she is *Irina Zaitseva*, which Ilya both appreciates and resents. He appreciates that his father is nowhere to be found in the footage, nowhere to be found in her name. The glory of her skating is all hers, hers alone. The resentment, then, is unfair, and Ilya knows it is. It is just that Ilya is nowhere to be found in the footage, either. He can’t help that he is so selfish in this way. That he wants to monopolize and covet everything he loves, claw it to him.

“She was so funny. Beautiful and funny. She is the one that put me first in skates.”

Probably, in a world where Irina Zaitseva had not married Grigori Rozanov, her son would have been a figure skater instead of a hockey player. That was, apparently, his father’s doing; hockey was the only acceptable form of an inherently feminine undertaking, any type of skating with beauty instead of violence built into it off-limits for his son. Ilya wonders, in some of his darker moments, if this is one of the things that hurt her, one of the ways he was responsible: that every time Ilya got on the ice, she was reminded that Grigori had the final say over even this.

Shane listens, his hands locked around Ilya’s. He absently traces over Ilya’s knuckles with his thumb. If Ilya unfocuses his eyes, and stares into the distance past the train window, he can see that it is snowing, in Poland or Belarus or wherever they are now. Inside the cabin, it’s warm, and Shane is warm, and Ilya can’t see his eyes, or his expression, and it’s easier to keep going this way, to say all of it.

“My whole life, she had this... this sadness. She was always sad. Sometimes it was worse than other times. It was worse when my father was hard on her. And usually, he was.”

Ilya takes a breath. This is the part that he has never really said out loud. No one has come into his life, until now, who has been important enough to be told. No one that has mattered. He is suddenly afraid that he will say it wrong, somehow, that he should have been practicing for this moment. That it is very important that Shane understands him, understands his mother.

“My mother had trouble sleeping, too. That was one of the symptoms, when she was very... very sad. They gave her pills for it. They were very strong. Sometimes, if she took them too late at night, she would still be asleep when it was time for me to leave for school. I would go to say goodbye to her and she would still be asleep.”

Shane’s fingers tighten just a little around Ilya’s, like he’s starting to anticipate what Ilya means to say. That these are not innocuous details but really, the heart of it.

“One day, I went to say goodbye before I left for school, and she was in bed, like when she overslept, because of the pills. And I went to wake her up, and she wouldn’t wake up. She didn’t wake up. My father told me and everyone else that it was an accident. That she had accidentally taken too many pills. But it wasn’t.”

After, he had looked them up, had scurried the bottle out of the bedroom before the police had come and worried the label off to save the name of the medicine. The directions were clear: take one an hour before bed. Do not mix with alcohol. His mother had taken an entire month’s supply, thirty pills, left the bottle empty. She had washed it down with vodka, the nice kind, from his father’s cabinet. Ilya had known before then, in the subconscious, sick way that one digests things too awful to directly confront, that it wasn’t really an accident, that there was no way it could be—his mother was careful, she had been taking the pills for some time. But that had left no doubt, then. The directions were clear, and so was the meaning: that his mother had chosen to leave him.

Shane squeezes Ilya’s hand. “Ilya...”

And something in the way he says it, the tightening of his hand around Ilya's, makes Ilya suddenly feel like he needs to clarify.

"I am not angry at her for doing it. I don't want you to be angry with her, either."

"I'm not."

"She didn't do it because she was weak. She..."

But he doesn't know what else to say after that. He doesn't know why she chose to do it. But he knows she loved him, so he knows that the choice must have been hard, and she did it anyway. So the other choice, the choice to stay with him, must have been impossible. How can he hate her for not being able to do the impossible? How can he think of her as weak for it?

"Ilya," Shane says, so softly. "I know. I know, baby."

They watch the snow outside a while, the landscape as it flies by. They could be anywhere right now. But Ilya is only half here, and half in the Moscow house, half in bed with the love of his life and half in the body of a twelve year old boy.

"Thank you for telling me about her," Shane says.

He brings Ilya's fingers to his lips, just grazing them, without applying pressure. Ilya takes a breath. Okay, he thinks, he will be able to say the rest.

"My father was sick for a long time. It was not a surprise."

When you are under a certain age, he's learned, they call it *early-onset dementia*. His father, who was fifty when he married Irina, was not at an age when diagnosed where dementia was given any sort of qualifier. It was more or less the expected state of things.

"He started to get confused just after World Juniors. Maybe before, but that is when I noticed. I think that I knew it was coming, the last time I was in Russia." Ilya feels his face break into something like a smile, at least around the edges. "He did not even remember not to be nice to me anymore."

"You've been taking care of him? From Boston?"

"I paid for things."

"What about your brother?"

"I paid him, too."

"To take care of your dad?"

"Yes."

"He wouldn't do it otherwise?"

Ilya has wondered this, too. If taking care of his father has just been a pretense because Alexei needed the money, if he would have still done it and demanded Ilya's money in other ways. Ilya doesn't know because he's never asked. Everything about his father and Alexei has seemed preordained from the beginning, Ilya's value to them, in the end, measured the same way it is to everyone else. Numbers in a bank account. Numbers on a scoreboard.

"Probably, he would."

This is probably the kindest thing Ilya can say about his brother: Ilya thinks he probably would have. But Ilya's money certainly made it easier.

Shane makes a noise of assent, or understanding. He brings Ilya's hands back down, pulls them tighter, so Ilya is wrapped around him and his arms brace Ilya's. Ilya leans his head forward until it's buried in Shane's dark, spiky hair and breathes him in.

"I do not want to talk about them anymore."

"Okay."

"Talk to me about something else, Shane."

"Like what?"

Ilya takes another deep breath. Shane's shampoo and Shane's deodorant and Shane's skin. "Tell me a story from when we got married."

"Okay." He thinks for a few moments. "We got married at the cottage. My cottage, um, in Lanaudière. In the summer, so we could have the ceremony in the backyard."

"Yes. I have seen your cottage."

"You have?"

"This is a surprise? *You* did TV special about it."

Shane laughs. "I can't believe you watched that."

"Woah, you can't believe I want to watch you, pretty boy." Ilya squeezes into him. "It is very beautiful there. Would be the perfect place."

"It pretty much is. You'll see," Shane says, and it briefly takes Ilya's breath away.

Shane takes one of Ilya's hands in both of his, holds it out in front of him, palm up, like he's about to read Ilya's fortune. His fingers trace the lines, drag over the callouses that a week away from the ice have not begun to soften.

"We bought each other's wedding rings," he says. "And we got them engraved. On the inside. You cried when I put yours on."

Ilya laughs at this, though he feels a little like crying now. Or telling Shane they should make time when they get back to Paris to do this, for real.

“Oh, did I?”

“Yeah,” Shane laughs. “You cried like a baby.”

“Not like a baby,” Ilya says. “Babies cry at little things. This is a big thing. Is romantic, to cry at your wedding. It is a good thing to do.”

And now Shane shifts, until he’s face to face with Ilya, his thighs on either side of Ilya’s hips, his hands cradling Ilya’s face.

“Did you also cry?” Ilya asks, into Shane’s brown eyes, filling his vision. He wonders if Shane can hear his heart, which is beating wildly for no reason at all.

Shane kisses him, opens his mouth, lets Ilya slip inside, takes him gratefully.

“Of course,” he says.

Sometime after the sky has darkened and Shane’s ordered another three salmon entrees to the room, some customs officials come to the door to process them for entry into Russia. Ilya is briefly nervous that some calamity will occur here, that they will reject Shane’s visa and not accept a bribe, that these will end up being the only two principled policemen in the entire country. But nothing noteworthy happens at all. They don’t even indicate they recognize Ilya’s name, just wordlessly shuffle through the pages of their passports, stamp them, and hand them back. Ilya wonders if he was maybe hoping for a little more friction, some indication from the universe that he was meant to be turned around with Shane and sent packing back to their Paris apartment. Apparently, not so lucky.

Shane suggests they try to get some sleep before they are woken up early on arrival. Ilya convinces him, instead, to play five more rounds of *durak* and lose, ends up with Shane in his lap, riding him, Shane’s hands gripping the rails above the bed in a way that Ilya can’t stop staring at, makes him think of fucking Shane in the locker room with his hands holding on to the overhead cubby for dear life. It’s funny how being with Shane can take the bite out of anything, any hardship in Ilya’s life, and traveling to his father’s funeral and recounting the story of his mother’s suicide count as two of the greater hardships of his recent life. But he already knows what he’ll remember from this, most of all. Shane in his lap, arching up, his knuckles going white overhead. Shane lying on top of him, watching the continent pass outside the window, describing their wedding rings, their ceremony at the cottage, painting a picture so beautiful that Ilya feels yawning hunger for it, wants it so badly he thinks he would do anything to get it. The rings and the wedding and the lifetime with Shane. Paris, all the time.

They must end up dozing off, after, because Ilya is woken up by the announcement that they are approaching Moscow Belorussky station. It’s biting cold and already four-thirty AM when they call the Yandex Taxi to Ilya’s condo. Shane fights to keep his eyes open on the drive, but Ilya has no problem doing so, staring out the window at snow falling on the city and feeling that same gnaw in his stomach that he always feels when he is back home, that

feeling that the world outside Russia ceases to exist when he's here, as if his life of wealth and success and generational athletic acclaim in the States is just a fever dream that he's abruptly woken up from. As if Russia gets its claws in him the minute he arrives on its soil and will never willingly give him back.

At least here, in this taxi that smells like tobacco and has Kremlin propaganda blaring on the radio, Ilya can turn and look at Shane, and maybe feel like there is an escape, after all. If he can just survive tomorrow. If he can just get his father in the ground, then they can go home.

Chapter End Notes

So, I did way too much research for this chapter, and now I have to share my findings. This was a real train route, once upon a time! A day-night-day direct Paris -> Moscow train, but they ended up suspending it in 2015 in favor of a night-day-night one that ran until 2020, however that did not work for Fic Purposes, so the day-night-day train was still running in the HR universe in 2017.

Also durak is such a fun game, highly recommend, I do think Ilya would be a terror at it. I myself was once the North American trying to beat my Slavic former in-laws at durak and utterly failing. Sorry Shane, better luck next time.

Thank you for reading, thank you for commenting, I really have read every single one and once again I have gotten sloppy with responding and now there are like 700 unreplied-to messages in my inbox 😊 I can't tell you how much your wonderful comments mean to me, the response to this fic has been so uplifting and motivating, I really really appreciate it, and we still have a good chunk of story to get through, so please stick around and drop a comment if you like this chapter <3

And come say hi to me on tumblr at [@scacao-blog](https://www.tumblr.com/scacao-blog)!

Chapter 10: Life is a shipwreck, but we must not forget to sing in the lifeboats

Chapter Summary

Shane attends his first funeral.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is Voltaire(-ish)!

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

It's cold in Ilya's big Moscow condo, and Shane wakes up, for once, not draped around him, feels chilly right from the moment he opens his eyes. Ilya is in bed beside him, but sitting up; he must have gotten up and come back to bed sometime after, because he's sipping a glass of something. Shane wants it to be water, but is sure it isn't. Shane reaches over and puts his hand on Ilya's thigh, squints up at him.

"Good morning," Ilya says. His mouth is sour with vodka when he bends to kiss Shane.

Shane has his walk-in suit for the games to dress in, which is thankfully an uncontroversial black, wearable anywhere, including a fucking surprise Russian funeral. Ilya dresses in a black turtleneck that he pulls from the master bedroom closet. There is a whole array of clothes in this apartment that Shane wonders when Ilya gets the time to wear. Ilya pours himself another finger of vodka before their car arrives to take them to the church. Shane drinks all of one of the tall Evian bottles he bought at the train station in lieu of food.

Shane has never been to a funeral. He was too young to sit through his grandfather's, or maybe he was there and he has no memory of it. He doesn't think it would be anything like Ilya's father's funeral though. Different religions, of course, probably no overlap between Russian Orthodox and Buddhist memorial practices. His grandfather was cremated and his ashes are housed in a cemetery somewhere outside of Ottawa, but Shane has never been to the gravesite. Honestly, he doesn't have a lot of experience with death firsthand at all.

Seeing Ilya's father laid out in the open casket is, therefore, a little freaky. The whole thing is, if he is being honest. Wreaths everywhere, people going up to the body and touching it and talking to it. It makes Shane feel itchy, makes him want to wash his hands, and he feels bad about it, but the crawling feeling is there all the same. Ilya, thankfully, does not touch his father's body when he goes up to the casket, and his visit is brief. Shane has to force himself not to stare at the side of Ilya's face when he sits back down, to give him his privacy. The

entire side of his body beside Ilya's feels hot, like it wants to lean toward him, to give Ilya some of his warmth, to give him something to brace against. But Ilya is sitting stock-straight, anyway, and he stares ahead at the priest when he stands up to start the proceedings.

The service itself is elaborate and esoteric, and Shane doesn't understand any of it. He is left to sort of appreciate it at its margins: the eerie, echoing quality of the hymns, the heavy gilded costumes of the priests, the flowers and the sparkling iconography of saints adorning the room, haloed in gold, unsmiling, hands piously outstretched. Shane takes furtive glances at the other people around them, wondering which of them is Ilya's brother. Wondering if there are other relatives here that he doesn't know about yet. Wondering if any of them are wondering what the fuck he's doing here, and how many times Ilya will have to explain him.

Ilya is quiet at his side, staring straight ahead, all the lines in his face hardened to stone. Shane is struck by a memory of Ilya looking much the same, just like this, gazing darkly out at the Vegas skyline and telling Shane he had to go home in three days. Shane was with him then, but had said the wrong thing, done the wrong thing, left him alone when he should have stayed. Always, he should have stayed.

Thinking this now, Shane lets his foot brush just so against Ilya's, ready to pull away if Ilya twitches his head. But Ilya slides his foot closer instead, and his mouth quirks the slightest bit at the corners, and Shane thinks the entire trip has now been absolutely worth it.

People mill around outside the room after the service. There is a car coming for the body at some point, and then he and Ilya will pile into another and follow it to the cemetery. People unsurprisingly make their way to Ilya here. He starts talking to people, occasionally glancing at Shane. Shane tries to hold himself in some way that says *friends*, wonders if it's unbelievably obvious Ilya and he are fucking anyway, the way he always fears when they are anywhere except fully decked out in hockey gear under arena lights. Thank god he can't be expected to have a conversation with anyone. He has no idea what he could possibly say by way of an explanation.

A tall woman in a floor-length black coat and a severely tidy blonde ponytail approaches Ilya. She is pretty and wearing enough makeup that even Shane can tell. She kisses Ilya on both cheeks, which he takes stiffly, or maybe that is just Shane's imagination. They talk for a few minutes before she leaves, and then it's not Shane's imagination, Ilya is clearly pissed, mouth a hard line, jaw jutting forward like he's chewing on the inside of his cheek.

"Who was that?" Shane asks.

"That was Polina. My father's wife."

"Is everything okay? What did she say?"

Ilya runs his hands over his clothes, shaking his head, and Shane thinks he isn't going to answer, but then he shrugs and says, "She wants ten thousand dollars."

"What the fuck?" Shane says, before he can stop himself. He probably shouldn't curse in a church, even in English, even if no one but he and Ilya understand. "What for?"

And now Ilya shrugs in a way that actually does mean he doesn't plan to answer.

A couple approaches, talks with Ilya, and then the man is turning toward Shane and holding out his hand to shake, and Shane is abruptly terrified, but shaking the hand and nodding without any understanding as the man speaks Russian to him. Then, in a low thunderous rumble of accented English, "Thank you for coming, Mr. Hollander."

As soon as they walk away, he looks to Ilya with shock. "Who was that?"

"That was Sergei Vetrov," Ilya says, which sounds vaguely familiar, and now Shane is wracking his brain for where he's heard the name. "Captain of the 1980 Olympic team," Ilya adds. "Svetlana's father and his second wife."

"Oh." Shane takes a big breath in. Not a problem, he can absorb all of that. Hearing Svetlana's name is not really painful anymore, given everything that's happened, but it still isn't exactly neutral. Even though he's only here because she pulled some strings somewhere, so. Shane should probably invest more time into appreciating her. "He knew about me." It sounds a little more like a question than he'd intended, the inflection betraying some of his concern, despite his best attempt to be neutral.

"Yes. Is fine. Svetlana told him you are a friend of mine. He helped with the visa."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, please, Shane."

"No, I'm not worried," Shane says, more quickly and emphatically than he feels, because he doesn't want Ilya to be bothered about him at the same time that he's apparently fielding shakedowns from his extended family.

They step outside of the church, where cars are starting to line up to bring family to the cemetery. The crowd here is decidedly thinner than it was inside. Shane wonders whether Ilya has grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins. Wonders if anyone else asks Ilya so casually for ten grand, if Ilya has cut a check for any of the other people who have come up to him today and shaken his hand or kissed him on the cheek.

And then someone does come up, a guy who looks big enough to be another hockey player, bigger than Ilya and Shane, wider, taller, and his eyes are the same as Ilya's eyes, the same as maybe their mother's eyes. Or their father's. Shane doesn't know, he didn't go up to the casket to look, and he thinks anyway his eyes were closed. But he knows this is Ilya's brother the minute they are standing in front of one another. Ilya has to look up a little to meet his stare. Nobody is smiling.

Ilya's brother has his hand on the back of a woman's neck, his wife, probably, and a little girl stands between them, her hand clasped in the woman's, her hair tied back neatly with a ribbon. She looks like her mother, not all that much like Ilya. Ilya's brother says something low and muttered and Ilya shakes his head, then crouches down and smiles a big, disarming grin for his niece. She sticks out her hand to him, he kisses it. Shane has to train the smile off his face. It's the happiest Ilya has looked all day.

Whatever his brother says to him next stiffens Ilya's entire body out, pulls him out of the little secret conversation with the girl. He stands rigidly back upright, and his niece brings her hand back and moves closer against her mother, and then they are moving away from him. Ilya steels his face into a neutral expression.

"Okay. Let's go."

In the car, he glances at the mirror, but the driver has his eyes forward, maybe has been instructed not to look at his famous passengers. Satisfied, Ilya wraps two fingers around Shane's hand where it rests on the seat between them. Shane lets his fingers close around Ilya's, and Ilya looks at him and lets out a long breath.

"My brother," he says. "Alexei."

Shane wants to ask *Are you okay?* but is afraid that might end the conversation right there, right when Ilya is giving him something very important. So instead he asks, "What's your niece's name?"

"Natasha. Nataly." He smiles out the window. "She is so big now. Almost eight years old. I was already in Boston when she was born."

"Do you get to see her when you're here?"

Ilya's smile flattens out. "Sometimes," he says, and squeezes Shane's hand.

"It was a nice service," Shane says.

"Yes. I made sure it was."

Shane thinks of all those calls on the phone, Ilya saying *It is all headache*.

"Did you handle all of it? Like, planning all of this?"

"Yes."

"Your brother didn't offer to help? Your stepmother?"

Ilya winces a little, maybe at *stepmother*. Polina looks maybe forty years old, not really old enough to be a mother to anyone their age. Maybe it's just that they only have the sort of relationship where she is *my father's wife*. Maybe that extends as far as demanding money from Ilya and not much else.

"No," Ilya says.

Shane wants to say something knee-jerk and unhelpful, something like *Fuck your family*. He wants to know what Alexei said to Ilya that straightened him back up and made Natasha pull back her hand like Ilya would burn it if he touched it too long. He wants to go back in time and have known all of this beforehand so he could offer to help pay for some of it, or something. Ilya would never have let him do it, and it wouldn't really even be appropriate, but *someone* should have.

“Are you okay?” Shane says now, because it’s either that or get impotently angry about Ilya’s family, and both will have the same effect.

“I’m fine, Shane,” Ilya says, and then they are quiet for the rest of the drive.

It is bitterly cold at the burial site, and humid in the air like snow might come later. There are more prayers here, delivered in a chilly huddle around the giant hole in the ground with the closed casket propped up beside it. Shane wonders if it’s uncomfortable for everyone here, the twenty or so people who are close enough to the deceased to watch him be lowered into the ground, or if it’s just him who finds the whole thing macabre and creepy. He wonders if it would feel maybe less so if Alexei wasn’t staring hard at Ilya the entire time, while Ilya just stares into the hole in the ground with his jaw set and his shoulders squared. It’s something like the look he gets when he’s about to drop gloves and toss someone to the ice.

They are walking back across the cemetery lawn to their car when Alexei catches up to them, and barks something in Russian at Ilya, grabs him by the shoulder. Natasha and her mother are nowhere nearby. Ilya stares at Alexei’s hand on his coat, eyes flat. He shakes his head, says something back, icy where Alexei’s voice is hot. He puts his hand over Alexei’s and peels it off his coat. Alexei stands and watches them the whole time they walk away, but Ilya does not turn back again.

In the car, Ilya cuts Shane off before he can even try asking what happened.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says, rubbing dirt off his hands. Shane’s hands are clean; he did not pick up any to throw into the hole to cover the coffin. It didn’t seem appropriate.

There is a dinner after the cemetery, at a restaurant that Ilya also paid for, a reservation he also made. All this over the phone, all this handled just by him. Just like the funeral, just like the burial. Shane has always thought Ilya traveled through life breezily, had always held some kind of simmering grudge about how it just wasn’t as *hard* for him as it was for Shane. Shane, weighed down by burden after burden, self-imposed and otherwise.

But Ilya has had his burdens, too, and no one to help carry them. All this time. Just because he smiled through it, laughed through it, fucked through it, Shane never saw them. He feels fucking stupid now, and small and selfish for not understanding. Ilya had to do all of this, alone, for a father that apparently didn’t care, for a family that doesn’t appreciate any of it.

By the time they are seated at the table, ornate, the room ostentatious and low lit, and the meal is being served, Shane is angry. Maybe it’s his own shame that is being turned outwards, he doesn’t know, but he can barely look at the other people around them. Fuck these people, all of them. They just let Ilya take all of this on, by himself. He glances around the room, at the little pieces of memorial paraphernalia, and he wants to throw it on the ground. He wants to get Ilya out of this room, away from these people. He wants to take him back to Paris and wrap him up in their bedsheets, where it’s warm, where it’s just them.

It’s new and frightening, a little, this protectiveness he feels over Ilya. He wants to do something, tap Ilya with his foot under the table, anything. But he doesn’t, he can’t. So he just seethes with it, lets it make him silent and taut with rudderless fury.

Ilya is quiet, too; he glances at Shane occasionally, checking on him with just his eyes, but otherwise just eats in silence. Some people talk, chat in appropriately low voices for the occasion, and Shane doesn't understand, of course, but he's used to it after the entire day, and the foreign words just flow over him like water. He knows when it's something said about Ilya by the way Ilya braces as he hears it, the way his jaw sets, but he doesn't react to the conversation around them now, so it must be innocuous, it must be unrelated to him.

The waiters take plates away and bring new courses out. Tiny crystal glasses of vodka are drunk and refilled. Shane has one, because he doesn't know if it's rude to refuse, and leaves it half empty. Across from them, Alexei eats like he's personally offended by being served this meal, keeps bringing his napkin to his lips and throwing it back to the table, like he wants a reaction, wants Ilya to look at him. In the low light, his eyes are black, the blue washed away in shadow. Every time Shane glances up, he's looking either at Ilya or at him, guilty by association.

Polina does not even bother to situate herself near her stepsons, which says everything that probably needs to be said. She fusses with her blonde hair and chats with Mr. Vetrov and his wife at one end of the table. She takes long, smooth sips of her drink, her red fingernails tapping against the crystal, and tiny, intentional bites of the food. Unless Shane missed it, she hasn't spoken a word directly to Ilya today after coming up to him with her figurative hand out at the service.

Sometime after dinner has been served, but before all of the tableware has been taken away to mercifully signal it's time to leave, Ilya rises to his feet, squeezing Shane's knee under the table for a moment. *I'm okay*. Or maybe, *Stay here*. He drops his napkin on his seat, and then he's gone, off to a side room. No one seems to wonder where he goes or look at him as he does. Jesus. Shane wonders if this is how it always is for him here, if he's always treated like some kind of invisible pest. He's spent the last nine summers like this?

Shane tries to see where he goes, but there's a curtain obstructing the view into the other room, and all he can hear are Ilya's footsteps. Alexei is standing up from the table barely thirty seconds later, following after him, and Shane realizes that some wordless exchange has occurred between them, that one or the other has beckoned them off to the side to talk in private.

Shane chews aimlessly on some food he doesn't taste, stares at the half-full glass of vodka. He wants to go after Ilya. He wants to see if he's okay. He has no idea how to make that look normal to this room of strangers, but do they even care? Do they wonder at all why Ilya has brought his friend, his coworker, whatever the fuck he called Shane, or does their curiosity in Ilya's life begin and end with his bank account? He hates these people, he thinks, and he's sure he really means it. Ilya's own feelings about his family may be complicated, but Shane's fortunately don't have to be. He can despise them enough for the both of them.

He thinks he hears Ilya's voice in the other room, and Alexei's. Whatever they are saying to each other starts off quietly enough, but Shane listens to it over the noise of utensils clinking against porcelain plates and glasses being filled and sipped and other conversation around him, until it's all he hears, and he hears the moment it becomes something else, the moment the words become hisses and then barely restrained shouts and then he's standing up from the

table himself and following after Ilya, not bothering to look back and see if any eyes watch after him.

“Ilya?”

Both Ilya and Alexei turn to look at him as he pushes the curtain aside. Ilya’s jaw is set tight, and the anger on his face is briefly all turned on Shane, before Ilya seems to catch himself and soften. Alexei’s eyes are wide, like a startled animal, his thin mouth flattened away to nothing, and he’s too close to Ilya, looming over him, in a way that is far too familiar to Shane, worn well in his memory by a lifetime of locker rooms and kids who made up for their lack of talent with their propensity to quick violence. Shane knows his type: Alexei is a weak man who is made more dangerous from his own knowledge of it. He jams a finger in Shane’s direction when he walks in and mutters something low in Russian.

Ilya’s reaction is so fast that Shane doesn’t see it coming. One moment, he’s standing, taut and angry and controlled, and the next he is lunging at Alexei, and has hands around his collar lightning fast, throwing him into the wall. Shane has seen Ilya in probably a hundred fights on the ice in his life, but he realizes then that he’s never actually seen Ilya truly furious before, seen his face twisted up like this, teeth bared to the gums and fist cocked back like a gun Ilya means to fire. Alexei has at least a head’s height on both of them, and he’s as broad across the shoulders as any enforcer, but he goes hard against the wall with the kinetic momentum of Ilya’s rage, like he weighs nothing. For a moment, all Shane thinks is that Ilya looks like he could really kill him, that it looks like he really wants to.

“Ilya, hey!” Shane says, before he even knows what he means to do. Before he realizes he’s trying to stop Ilya from punching his brother’s lights out, even if part of him really wants to see him do it. Maybe that will satisfy a little of the anger Shane feels himself.

But he’s seen Ilya knock teeth out on a single hit. He’s seen him break noses, shatter orbital bones, and maybe he can get away with it, with enough money or enough humiliation that Alexei just slinks away, but maybe he can’t. Maybe even being Ilya Rozanov would not be enough to get away with beating the shit out of a policeman, no matter how much he deserves it. And more than anything, Shane just wants to get Ilya out of Russia and take him home. Take him away from everything that makes him look like this, like a dangerously cornered animal. Back to Paris, back to their apartment. Losing that just for the temporary satisfaction of hearing Alexei’s bone crunch under his fist isn’t worth it.

“*Ilya*,” Shane says again.

Ilya seems to come back to himself then. He lowers his hand, shoves Alexei hard away from him. Ilya says something to him, the words spat out, the disdain clear even without understanding the meaning. It seems to do the trick. Alexei collects himself in the mirror, straightens out the wrinkles in his collar where Ilya grabbed him, and leaves, looks hard at Shane one more time before he’s gone back out through the curtain and left them alone. Ilya stands with his hands curled into fists at his sides and looks after him.

“Hey, are you okay?” Shane says.

Ilya turns to him. He's still angry, pupils reduced to pinpoints, chest rising and falling in gulping waves, and Shane doesn't know if he's angry at him, if he deserves it. Maybe he should have let Ilya deck his brother, he doesn't know. Maybe he shouldn't have gotten between them, or followed Ilya here. Maybe he's made things worse, somehow.

Ilya glances toward the curtain one more time, then moves to Shane, touches his face for a moment, where no one can see.

"Get your coat," he says. "We are leaving."

Ilya leads Shane back through the dining room, and Shane does not bother looking back at the people still at the table, does not check to see if Polina or Alexei or his wife have turned to look at them as they leave.

It's snowing outside, coming down in slow fat clumps that hover in the air around them between Shane's exhaled puffs of breath. He watches the back of Ilya's head as they walk, watches snowflakes catch delicately in his hair, nestle into little patterns among his curls. Ilya digs into his pocket for a cigarette, lights it up while they walk. Shane doesn't say anything about it, doesn't wonder aloud if he's down to his last one, if he meant it when he said he'd stop after the pack was empty.

A block or so away from the restaurant is a cramped tunnel, meant for pedestrians to cross under the roadway overhead. The road and the street are deserted, and when they duck inside the underpass, they are alone. Ilya huddles up against the wall and shakes the snow out of his hair, dog-like. His eyes are hard and stare aimlessly down one end of the tunnel, away from Shane. It takes real effort for Shane not to reach out and wrap his arms around him, pull him close. If this was Paris, he thinks he would.

He hates this, Shane realizes. He hates being anywhere in the world where it would be ruinous for them to touch.

"We are going home tomorrow, first thing," Ilya says.

"Okay."

Ilya shakes his head, as if Shane's disagreed with him. "I am never coming back here again."

Shane feels immediate relief at hearing Ilya say this. After all he's seen today, Shane sincerely hopes, most of all, that Ilya never has to come back here, for any reason.

He looks down the tunnel after Ilya's gaze, at the snow falling, at their footprints leading them here. He thinks about Alexei's wild eyes and his back against the wall and Ilya's hands at his neck.

"What did your brother say?"

Ilya shakes his head again. This time it's really directed at Shane. "I do not want to tell you."

"Ilya..."

Ilya looks at him, up and down, unsubtle. “What do you think he said, Shane?”

Shane wishes he could have no reaction to this, because Ilya doesn’t need him to freak out over his brother apparently calling him a faggot in Russian. And it doesn’t matter, anyway, he will probably never see Alexei again. But he flinches, and Ilya sees it, and takes a hard drag off his cigarette and makes a gesture with his hands and his eyebrows as if to say, *See, this is why I didn’t want to tell you.*

“He’s an asshole,” Shane says. It is an obvious thing to say. It goes without saying. But Shane says it anyway. He’s always been good at stating the extremely obvious.

Ilya nods. He lets the smoke out between his lips, blowing it away from Shane.

“He is scared. It is making him act like this.”

Shane scoffs, incredulous.

“He is,” Ilya says.

“What does he have to be scared of?”

Ilya looks down at his cigarette. Blows out his breath. Sounds so tired when he says, “Money. It is always money.”

“Fuck, Ilya.”

Shane doesn’t know what to say, what is all right for him to say.

Your family are a bunch of fucking vultures. What have you been doing all these years, coming home to this? You could have stayed with me. I would have let you, if I had known. I would have asked you to. I can’t believe you’ve been going through this alone, all this time.

He will probably say all of those things, at some point. But they don’t seem appropriate on the same day Ilya had to bury his father, no matter how true they are. So instead, Shane just says, “I’m so sorry.”

“I am sorry, too.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“No,” Ilya says, looking at the ground. “It is different. I’m sorry for a lot of things.”

“Sorry for what? For paying for fucking everything and getting no gratitude for it?”

Ilya snorts a little laugh.

“What?” Shane says, and it comes out sharper than intended, his anger at Ilya’s family leaking out at the edges, turned directionlessly at Ilya.

But Ilya just smiles. “I like when you are mad on my behalf, Shane.”

Just hearing that is enough to draw a little of the anger off of him, squeeze it out of him like it's water wrung from a sponge, make Shane go soft and warmed-through. "It's true, though."

"Yes, maybe so. But Alexei is also mad at me because I did not take care of my father. And he is probably right to be."

"He's not right," Shane says, "you weren't even here."

"Yes. But I'm sorry for that too. For not being here."

"Ilya."

Ilya puts his cigarette out under his shoe, grinding it into the damp asphalt, then rights himself, shrugs up into his full height. He offers Shane a tiny smile, and if this was Paris, Shane would kiss him now, out in the open. Run hands through his hair, pick out the curls with his fingers, the way that makes Ilya go happily relaxed when he does. It would fix something, Shane thinks, would drain the tension out of Ilya's shoulders and blunt the sharpness in his eyes. That's all Shane wants to do, for the rest of his life, probably: kiss the sadness out of Ilya, touch him until he's happy again.

Like he's reading Shane's mind, Ilya says, "Is okay, Shane. You don't have to try to make me feel better."

"Yes I do," Shane says, childishly, and Ilya laughs at it, looking at him so fondly that Shane feels brave enough to say the rest. "That's like, my job, I think."

"Your job?"

"As like, I don't know. Your boyfriend. Whatever."

"My boyfriend," Ilya repeats, sounding a little awed, a little in disbelief. He smiles, maybe the first real one Shane's seen all day. It is a little like looking directly at the sun. It takes Shane's breath away. "Thank you Shane. I feel better."

Shane is so relieved that he's sure he looks stupid right now, grinning like a maniac. "Really?"

"Really."

Shane is acutely aware that if anyone wandered into this tunnel and saw the way they were looking at each other right now, it would be deeply incriminating. There's no way to tamp down how much he loves Ilya. His emotions overwhelm him, feel like they are trying to explode out of him in all directions. They twist his heart into tight knots and steal the air out of his lungs.

God, this is really how it feels, to find the love of your life. Like he's falling off a building, and like he's soaring into the air. The best and the worst things he's ever felt, all at once.

It's agony to stand here, and not to touch Ilya. They need to get back to Paris, where Shane can breathe. Where he can be by Ilya's side and not have it feel so debilitating.

Ilya sighs and looks back toward the way they came. “I have to go back. I still have to pay people.”

“Okay,” Shane says, even though he would love nothing more than to get Ilya away from everyone back at that restaurant, forever. “Let’s go back.”

“Actually, Shane, I want you to do something for me.”

“Okay.”

“Will you go back to my apartment and wait for me there?” Ilya says.

“Ilya.”

“I will be fine,” Ilya says. “But, when I’m done with everything here, I want to come home to you.”

Shane drinks in his smile and the soft set of his eyes as they gaze at him. He would do anything for Ilya, just to keep him looking at Shane like that. Even something he doesn’t want to do at all, like leave Ilya alone for a minute today. Let him out of Shane’s sight for any time at all.

“Okay,” Shane says, despite that.

Ilya pulls out his phone. “I will call you the taxi.”

They watch the little car approach on Ilya’s phone. It is a good excuse for Shane to huddle close to him, shoulder to shoulder, as they stand at the side of the road. Snowflakes fall on Ilya’s screen and melt into little droplets that warp the driver’s ETA in strange, unreadable swirls. Shane stares at the driver’s name in bold Cyrillic letters and wonders what it says.

“Maybe I should learn Russian.”

Ilya’s response is swift. “No.”

“Hey!”

Ilya reaches out and pinches the reddened tip of Shane’s nose. “How will I keep secrets from you if you learn Russian?”

“You’re not supposed to keep secrets.”

Ilya makes a face like he means to disagree. “Tell you what. You learn to say ‘can I suck your cock’ in Russian, and I will teach you everything.”

Shane laughs, feeling almost breathless. “You’re so annoying.”

The taxi arrives, and Ilya unnecessarily opens the door for him, and it makes Shane smile and go warm and charmed all over. He rubs a hand across his eyes to hide some of the flush in his cheeks and slips into the backseat.

“See you soon,” Ilya says, closing the door.

“Yeah.”

It feels strange, punching in a door code as he stands on the welcome mat outside Ilya’s place. Home now feels like pulling jangling keys out of his pocket.

It’s cold in the apartment and Shane wishes Ilya was there to wrap big arms around him right in the entryway and kiss his neck until he feels like he’s on fire. Shane worried the whole way back, alone in the cab, thinking about Alexei’s scowl and the way the anger bled out of Ilya once they were alone. It left behind a deep exhaustion, a long-held sadness. He will never let Ilya come here alone again, if he can help it.

Shane is tired, too, and it feels too empty being alone in Ilya’s house. It feels too empty being separated from him at all. Shane misses him, and he was just with him. He used to be so much better at this. Or, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he was just better at lying to himself.

Shane folds his suit and packs it back in his suitcase before he showers, and seeing all of his clothes folded away, ready to go, helps somewhat, though it will be a long afternoon before they can board a train back to Paris. Just starting the preparation to go home is a comfort.

Maybe it’s disrespectful to the dead to get himself ready in the shower for sex, disrespectful to anticipate it, to want it, but whatever. Shane does it anyway, crawls into the bed naked afterwards to wait for Ilya. Stretches out with the unfamiliar sheets wrapped around him and drops his arm over his eyes and listens for the door, for heavy footsteps, for that deep rolling voice carrying his name across the threshold, his favorite sound in the world.

What a fucking day, Ilya thinks. He feels ten years older as he keys in the code for his apartment. God, let this be the last time. Alexei can have this fucking place, have this entire fucking country, if Ilya can just have some lasting peace from now on.

He doesn’t even mind giving Natasha his money; that is the stupidest part of all of this. Alexei didn’t have to jam a finger in his face and call him a cocksucker for it, he was always planning to give her a trust fund. Everyone thinks he’s going to fuck them over, let them down, and he never fucking has, not once in his life. And somehow, that only makes everyone hate him more.

He’s tired of it, in a way that maybe has been building to his entire life, but feels so much more urgent now, no longer bearable, no longer something Ilya wants to just endure. Some part of him has fundamentally changed, watching his father’s casket lowered into the frozen ground, the embalmed, plasticine grimace molded to his face, surrounded by flowers and silk and gilded pictures of saints Grigori certainly didn’t believe in.

Whatever the sad story of his family was, it feels as if the pen has been put down, and the book closed. His father can't call him anymore to scream at ghosts that he doesn't realize are no longer there. The light in the kitchen that terrified him, that voice calling through the house, *Welcome home, Ilyusha*, like a life sentence being read by a judge, they are well and truly memories now. Being afraid of his father, hating his father, pitying his father, pitying himself. It's all, finally, over. And maybe, with it, Ilya's obligation to his father's country. Maybe he can live now without having to tear out all the parts of himself that Russia could never abide.

The apartment is dark and quiet. For a moment, Ilya forgets there is meant to be anyone here, waiting for him. This is familiar, the empty rooms, the darkness and silence that falls like a curtain around him, a comforting embrace after a night chasing whatever it was he spent his summers searching for in Moscow clubs and bars. He never liked to bring anyone back here, and maybe this is why. He wanted this silence and darkness to belong to only him.

But there is dim yellow light escaping past the master bedroom doorway, bleeding just beyond the threshold to the living room, and he remembers: Shane is here.

"Shane?"

Shane's voice calls out from the bedroom. "In here!"

Ilya kicks off his shoes. He shrugs off his wet coat, thinks he hangs it up, but maybe he misses the hook and it falls to the floor, he doesn't care to check. All he wants to do is see Shane. All he wants to do is sink into him, pour over his entire body, drink him in, his smile, his dark eyes, his warm skin.

Shane is waiting for him on the bed, legs slightly hitched up, hands spread out on the sheets, mouth slightly open, anticipatory and eager and unguarded. Miles of broad, dusky skin, his chest bare, the exposed arrow of his pelvis trailing below the crumpled sheets, everything else hidden from Ilya's view. Shane looks proud of himself, like he knows exactly how irresistible Ilya would find it, and a little bashful, like he's embarrassed to play at being seductive. Which Ilya finds, of course, lethally sexy.

"Hi," Shane says. "Welcome home."

It hits Ilya hard enough to crack his ribs, his heart wringing out and taking all of his words with it when he tries to answer. When he reaches out, he gets only Russian back.

«You are so fucking perfect.»

Shane reaches his hands out toward him, beckoning him to the bed, like Ilya needs more of an invitation than Shane's body and his smile and his dark eyes swimming in shadow. Ilya doesn't even bother to undress, just lunges on hands and knees forward onto the mattress, crawls over top of Shane, tearing the sheets away from Shane's lap as he comes, needing to touch him, needing to feel Shane underneath him. He grabs Shane's outstretched hands, locks his fingers around Shane's wrists, pins them up over his head. Shane hums low in his throat, spreads his legs for Ilya to fit himself between them.

Ilya licks Shane's smile apart, kisses him hungrily, spit-slick and gleaming when Ilya pulls away to examine his work. Shane looks gone already, eyes unfocused, panting a thin line of uneven breaths into the air between them. A beautiful mess, Ilya's alone to take apart or put back together as he sees fit.

Ilya is suddenly so grateful that Shane is here, offering him this. That the memories he will leave Russia with are Shane's legs wrapped around Ilya's waist and his moans swallowed down Ilya's throat.

"I love you," Ilya says.

"I love you, too."

And then, unexpectedly, embarrassingly, Ilya's throat goes tight and his eyes burn, and Shane's soft smile goes blurry in his vision. He has to bury his head into Shane's neck, cling to him there, while his emotions go into open revolt. Ilya breathes, and breathes, and all he can think is, *I'm home. I'm home. When I'm here with you, everything else is unimportant.*

It already feels far away, the casket lowering into the ground, Polina's unabashed audacity at the church, Alexei's fear and greed and undisguised loathing. The way Nataly had come to him so sweetly, only to be pulled harshly back. The fear that one day, she won't remember him at all, won't be allowed to. That she might not even know it's him paying for her clothes and her pretty house, and that he would do so much more, be so much more for her, if he was only allowed to be.

And it doesn't even matter anymore, because Shane is here, and Ilya can't see or hear or worry about anything else. Can't fear anything else. He is focused only on this: that Shane's heart is so open and undefended, and that Shane's offered it to him without pretense, without demanding anything in return.

Ilya had forgotten, somehow, what it felt like to have that. His mother left, and all of that had evaporated with her, and Ilya had never thought he would ever have it again. He'd thought that it would be something he would remember only when the light caught his cross the right way. *One time you were safe. One time you were loved, really loved, seen exactly for you are and accepted anyway, all of the needy, wanting, hurtful parts of you.* But he is flooded with it now, here where Shane surrounds him.

He wants to say it out loud, say *something*, but he can't choke anything out, embarrassingly strangled by how fast it's all come over him. He runs his arms up under Shane's broad back instead, pulling him closer. Maybe Shane will understand if Ilya can get him close enough to hear Ilya's rushing blood, Ilya's ragged breaths, Ilya's pounding heart beating only for him.

"Ilya..."

"Sorry. I think I am just... overwhelmed." English has completely abandoned him today, slipping through his fingers when he tries to grasp onto the words. "Too much in my head."

Shane runs his hands across Ilya's back, noses into Ilya's temple, his quiet breath warm against Ilya's ear. "Do you want to just talk?"

Ilya shakes his head into the cavern of Shane's neck and shoulder and Shane laughs, and it is Ilya's favorite sound in the world. Shane should always be laughing, and touching him, so Ilya can cling to him, like the beacon of light in the darkness that he is, has always been for him. Everything else can sink into shadow, and Ilya will find his way as long as Shane keeps turning his beautiful, smiling face to him.

Ilya's face feels wet when he presses it against Shane's neck, trails his lips along the column of Shane's throat. His eyes are humid, scratchy at the edges, and the thought does occur that he didn't cry at all today, but he thinks he's crying now. Here in this bed, where it's safe, pressed all the way up against Shane. He mouths over the outline of Shane's jaw, and Shane just tilts further into his kiss, parts his lips for Ilya to slide between them, lick his mouth apart, bury his tongue inside him like he means to find all the spaces left between them and cancel them out, fill them in everywhere.

"I cannot look at you like this and just *talk*," Ilya mumbles against Shane's mouth. He can feel Shane's smile curl against his lips, feel his teeth close behind.

"Then fuck me, please."

Ilya peels off his clothes, or Shane tugs them off, it's somewhere between a collaboration and a desperate tangle of blind wanting. Getting naked with Shane has always felt like the most important mission of his life, and it's never fast enough, he's never quick enough to press his entire body down against Shane's burning skin and feel all of him at once. It always feels desperate, when he finally does, like he's out of breath, like a double shift on the ice.

He's cold, from the outside, or from the surreal misery of the day, or maybe he's been cold his whole life, stealing Shane's warmth when he can. He does so now, sinking back into Shane's mouth, gripping into Shane's strong thighs and wrapping them around him, and it's still not enough. It might never be enough. He needs too much, he loves too much. He won't ever be satisfied as long as he has breath left in his body that he hasn't yet given over to Shane.

Shane touches him everywhere, sinks his fingers into Ilya's hair, drags them over his arms, squeezes painfully, satisfyingly hard into Ilya's biceps when Ilya lowers his head back to Shane's neck and closes teeth over his skin. He would tattoo the bruises his mouth leaves on Shane's body if he could. Make them stay forever, show everyone how Shane belongs to him. That all of this is his, in exchange for Ilya's wounded and undeserving heart. It's not a fair trade at all, but Shane has yet to figure that out. If Ilya is very, very lucky, he never will.

Ilya maps his way down Shane's body with his mouth, no other guide needed. He knows this body by heart, by touch, by taste. Sometimes he thinks he may know it better than his own. He closes his lips around Shane's nipple, traps it between his tongue and his teeth. It goes hard and hot for him, and he moves to the other side, bites down right there, the imprint he leaves behind mercifully obvious against his tongue. *Mine. You're mine, my everything. This is all for me. This is all mine. The evidence is right here.*

"Ilya, fuck," Shane breathes, arching into him, pushing down on the back of Ilya's head, getting more of Ilya's mouth on him. "Fuck, baby, oh god..."

Ilya drags his teeth down the cleft of Shane's tits, his trembling abs, his obliques, the shallow dip of his iliac crest. Shane's hard cock butts up against his chin, and he noses around it, burying his face into Shane's dark pubic hair. Drags his tongue below Shane's balls, along the sensitive skin there, and everything smells like Shane, his sweat and his scent and his lust. It is almost unbearable how fucking hard Ilya is. He thinks he could come from just this, just the way Shane fills his mind and his senses, how he moans when Ilya sucks his balls, one after the other, before he swallows Shane's cock down his throat, gets him soaking wet with spit and precome, watches it bead along his skin and shine on Ilya's fingers when he scoops it up to fuck it back into Shane, pry him open.

"Ilya... Ilya, god, I fucking need you, I need your cock, fuck me, please, god, fuck me."

It breaks him apart, Shane's gasping, hoarse voice, his hands in Ilya's hair, pulling hard, steering him back up to Shane's face to kiss him loose and wet and open, Shane's mouth drooling and unfocused. Ilya doesn't need to look down to slot his cock up against Shane's hole, could do this in the dark with his hands tied, but he does anyway, watches with awe and stunned silence as his cockhead opens Shane up and his dick slides all the way in, watches it come back out wet and slick, some incredulous part of him having to see it happen to believe it.

He mumbles into Shane's mouth as he starts to really fuck him, Shane's hands still painfully tight in his hair, his huge thighs crushing around Ilya's waist.

"Fuck, Shane, you're mine, you're mine."

Shane's face is pressed up so close that it's hard to breathe, hard to tell where Shane ends and he begins. Everything feels like it's on fire, like sparklers are going off behind his eyes, and he's unmoored like the very first time he fucked Shane, blown away by how it could feel.

Some deeply buried, purposefully ignored part of him knew then, that he was done for, that he would never, ever escape this. He doesn't remember anymore why he ever wanted to. It feels like a miracle, that Shane is here, that Shane loves him, that Ilya could stand at his father's grave with freezing soil in his hand and look to his side and see Shane there, like some desperate fever dream his mind cobbled together.

He can't believe he gets to have this, here in the bed and the apartment he bought with his first fuck-you money, not the first and not the last time he tried to impress his father before he finally understood that he never would succeed, that his father would never give him the satisfaction. And there will be no more attempts. Not for Papa, or Alexei, or this entire godforsaken country that has only coldly looked on at him as he tried and tried and tried to get it to love him back.

This isn't his home anymore. This isn't home, like Boston isn't home. He lived here for half of his life, and he's lived in Boston for the other half, but neither of them are his home.

Home is a pair of strong hands in his hair and an unguarded smile and impossibly big brown eyes. Home is a set of pretty, full lips and long eyelashes and a hundred scattered freckles on pinked, burning cheeks. Home is this beautiful body and this huge heart that Ilya has managed to work his way inside of and burrow down into and never, ever intends to evict

himself from. Shane will have to rip him apart into a thousand pieces if he ever means to tear him out again.

He hopes his father is somewhere seeing this. Shane shakes and tightens around his dick as he comes, and breathes out, "I love you, fuck, Ilya, I love you so much," and Ilya thinks, *Do you hear that, Papa? I'm home*. And comes apart to that thought, buried up to the hilt in Shane, bottomed out, welcomed inside all the way.

They stretch out against each other, drifting hazily along the remnants of their orgasms, Shane's mouth against Ilya's soaked curls, Ilya's breath a ragged line against Shane's neck. He stays that way until he slips, softened, out of Shane, and then he pulls Shane back against him, slots Shane's dark head under his chin, and stares up at the ceiling swimming over them.

Ilya feels suddenly done with this place. All at once, everything in the room feels unfamiliar, like he's woken up in someone else's apartment, like he doesn't recognize the version of himself that bought it and furnished it and spent almost a decade of summers here. That version of himself never woke up in Paris with Shane wrapped around him, and that version of himself is not the one holding Shane close against him now.

Alexei can have it. Ilya doesn't belong here anymore.

"I can't wait to go back to Paris," Ilya says.

Shane smiles, propped up on his elbow so he can peer down at Ilya. He grazes his thumb across Ilya's chin, catching on the stubble. "Me too."

Ilya sighs. "If it were not so late, I would go back tonight."

"Yeah?"

Ilya closes his eyes and pictures their big bed and the white sheets that they never manage to keep tidy for long. He pictures the gleam of the tile in the bathroom. The cold damp floor of the terrace under his feet. The slow sink into the couch when he lays Shane down across it.

He's so homesick for it, for the warmth of Shane in every corner and room and moment there, his smile from across the kitchen island, his legs draped over Ilya's on the couch, his body curled up against Ilya's at night, hot and damp no matter how low they set the thermostat, always sticky and close. Shane's toothbrush, slotted against his own on the bathroom vanity. Shane's towel, hanging beside his. The artificial tang of Shane's protein powder, the grease on Ilya's fingers from the croissants that Shane keeps buying for him. Homesick for a place that isn't even theirs to keep, a precious life that they are merely borrowing, stealing sips of paradise from, trying to draw each one out to be forever. Willfully ignoring that they can't.

The words start coming out of him then, wrung out from the crushing tightness in his chest when he thinks about any kind of life after this, the one he knew before he lived with Shane in Paris. The one lived by the Ilya who belonged to this Moscow apartment, the half of a life it was.

“I don’t ever want to leave. I want to watch the Eiffel Tower lights with you every night. I want to go to a thousand museums with you.” Ilya’s throat feels so tight that it’s hard to even whisper the words out, but he does, because he doesn’t know if he can even breathe again if he doesn’t say this. “I will buy this apartment for you. Okay? We will make the second bedroom into a guest room. Your parents can stay when they come visit. Or Svetlana.”

Shane’s face falls. “Ilya...”

“Let’s just stay,” Ilya says, pleading, desperate, voice almost unrecognizable even to himself. “Let’s stay. I will never play another game of hockey again if I can spend every single day of my life with you.”

“Ilya.”

The tears pool at the edges of Shane’s eyes and catch in his thick lashes, and he looks as wrecked as Ilya feels admitting this deepest, most impossible desire out loud. Ilya pulls him down into a kiss, tasting the same sick mix of pathetic bliss and utter misery he feels. He runs his lips over Shane’s closed eyes, over the wet tracks down his cheeks. Wraps his arms around Shane and tucks his head back down against Ilya’s chest. Shane buries himself there, taking long, shuddering breaths, and they just hold each other, until sleep finally overtakes them.

Ilya wakes with Shane still buried into him, the sky outside the window swirling and grey with early morning gloom. The wrong kind of grey, not the grey of Paris, icier, harder. He didn’t know until now that he could become homesick even for *clouds*. God, they need to get back soon, he is becoming so maudlin with the distance.

He presses a kiss against Shane’s hair, and Shane begins to stir, slowly stretches himself out along Ilya’s body, cranes up to kiss under Ilya’s jaw.

“Good morning, Ilya.”

“Good morning, Shane.”

It would be nice, Ilya thinks, as they slowly disentangle themselves from each other, if they could fast forward through the next thirty-six hours. They still have to buy tickets for the next train to Paris. Ilya wishes he could close his eyes and wake up a day and a half later, back in the apartment, safely three thousand kilometers from Moscow.

He is ready to put some distance between himself and the events of the last twenty-four hours. He is ready to smell the cold wet air on their terrace and burn his last cigarette down to nothing while the lights glow on the Eiffel Tower. He is going to lay Shane down on the couch as soon as they get back and eat him out until he begs for Ilya’s cock to fill his hole.

Ilya thinks maybe he'll spend their homecoming working all the grooves back into the bed and seeing how high Shane's hand prints can reach on the wall.

Thinking about it now, Ilya reaches for Shane, pulls him back down and slides his tongue into his mouth, kissing him lazily until Shane taps him lightly on the chest.

"Okay, okay. I still need to look at tickets."

Shane rolls away from him to grope for his phone on the nightstand. Ilya rubs his hands over his face and gazes over at him.

"Shane," he says, reaching into the sheets to work his palm absently over his half-hard dick.

Shane smiles, shakes his head even as he stares intently at the movement under the sheets. "After, okay?"

"Yes."

Shane tears his eyes away from Ilya to look at his phone, sitting up higher on the bed, leaning back against the headboard.

Ilya watches him scan over the screen, illuminated in it. His eyes track along the lines of whatever he sees there and Ilya watches the smile wash off his face.

"Shane?"

Shane's face goes hard and shuttered, immediately, so fast it makes Ilya's gut fill with cold, sudden dread.

Ilya pushes himself to sit up higher on the bed. "Shane, what is it?"

Wordlessly, Shane hands his phone to Ilya. He turns and stares out the window as Ilya takes it.

With blood roaring in his ears, Ilya looks down at the screen. Shane has the front page of *The Globe and Mail* pulled up, and the first headline is huge in his vision:

Airspace Restored Across Europe as Eruption Clears

Shane doesn't even look at him, just stares out at nothing, at the grim Moscow morning, and it feels suddenly just as cold inside the apartment as it must outside, like all the windows have been left open, like all the air has frozen, as Shane speaks.

"Looks like we're going home."

Oh no the plot again 😭

Thank you guys, again, the response to this fic is really crazy to almost the point of overwhelming? I am almost too whelmed? I'm so happy so many people want to come wallow in the melancholy sweet vibes with me here. I'm glad to have found fellow durak-enjoyers and people who have their own Eyjafjallajökull love stories and who also agree with the only correct Louvre take, Winged Victory > Mona Lisa.

Call me Bernie Sanders, because I am once again asking for your comments (if you want! no pressure! some pressure, ok, I'm lying, I just love reading them so much).

Find me on tumblrrrrr: [@scacao-blog](https://www.tumblr.com/scacao-blog)

Chapter 11: The sky was pouring down its gloom upon the dismal, torpid world

Chapter Summary

“Let’s go back to Paris,” Ilya says.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Parisian Dream by Charles Baudelaire (so poetically morose! Love you B-dog)

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

“Shane.”

Ilya’s voice has shaken off the remnants of sleep; the thick purr his accent has first thing in the morning, that Shane loves to hear wrapped around his own name, is already dissipated. His voice sounds a little tight instead, a little pleading. Shane stares out of the window at a skyline he doesn’t recognize. He feels like he’s been hit hard in the solar plexus, the way that makes him collapse against the boards and cough and spit helplessly onto the ice. Hard to swallow, hard to do anything except take reedy breaths through his nose, in and out. His blood roars so loud in his ears that, at first, he isn’t sure he’s heard Ilya say anything at all.

It is early morning in Ottawa, in Montreal, in Boston. Maybe no one will bother them for a few more hours, but this is front page news in Canada. Front page news worldwide, probably, but that’s what he checked first, because that’s the same news his parents will read, Theriault will read, and soon they will both be fielding text messages and calls expecting them to board a plane home as soon as possible.

He can’t, physically cannot, look at Ilya.

Last night, Ilya had said to him that he would never play hockey again, if he got to stay with Shane. Those words are still ricocheting around Shane’s brain, rattling inside his ribcage. Shane is afraid to examine them too closely, look at them headlong, or at the way he feels when he does anything but hold them loosely in his mind and then let them slip past. Like how good it sounded, rolled in Ilya’s low voice, how earnest he looked, like he really meant it. How much Shane had felt pulled toward it too, insanely, irrationally. The way the tears had found their way out of him of their own volition.

Thank god we don't have to go home yet, Shane had thought last night. He had thought there was still time. It is only Sunday. The articles had said early next week.

“Shane.”

They are going to have to get flights out of Moscow to go home. They are going to have to pack in Ilya's apartment and go straight to the airport, probably, and then they will take separate planes to separate cities and by this time tomorrow, Shane will be home alone in his giant, empty bed in Montreal. And Ilya will be in Boston. He won't be wrapped around Shane's body, breathing quietly in his ear, and Shane won't be able to rest his head down on Ilya's chest and fall asleep to the rhythm of Ilya's heartbeat. They will go back to separate lives, back to two, three, five times a year of season games, sometimes with so little time to spare that they barely get an hour to desperately get off together before they have to leave again. A couple of weeks together in the summer, maybe. And that's all Shane sees, stretching out interminably on the horizon, living the only happy parts of his life in secret, and not enough time, never enough time.

He can't do this. Oh fuck, he can't do this.

He feels the bed sink beside him, feels Ilya press up along his back and slip broad arms around his bare waist. A warm kiss is dropped against his shoulder.

“Shane.”

“What. What is it.”

Shane doesn't mean to sound so furious. He's not even mad. He just can't unlock his jaw or he's going to start crying. He can hear the tremor in his voice, anyway. He is standing at the edge of a cliff, and his shaking voice sounds like the wind howling up from the sheer drop on the other side.

“Let's go back to Paris,” Ilya says, smoothly, like it is so easy. Like it is an option at all. Maybe he has lost his fucking mind, too.

Shane sucks in a breath. Maybe he *is* mad, actually. “We can't.”

“Is one AM back home. We are the first ones to know, so. We can take advantage. We will be back by the time everyone else wakes up.”

“Ilya.”

Shut up, he wants to say, even though it's impossibly cruel, to say it and mean it. Shut up, stop talking about this. Because they can't have it, they can't do it, it's impossible. Saying it is only going to make the hurt worse. It's only going to make them both miserable.

But he's already thinking about it, unable to help himself, as soon as Ilya's breathed the words along the back of his neck. Their big unmade bed, their fuzzy cream couch, their grey rooftops, their Eiffel Tower. Another night together. Shane wants it so *badly*.

Ilya unwraps himself from around Shane and rises from the bed, crossing naked to his bag, crouching down by it. He fishes something out from his pile of clothes and comes back to sit next to Shane's legs on the edge of the mattress, holding it out for Shane to see.

It's the keychain, the big stupid one Ilya decided to buy on their first night in the apartment, *I Heart Paris* knocking against the three identical keys that Shane still puts in the wrong doors half of the time.

"See? I still have keys. I have to return these to Marie."

"Oh."

Shane stares at the keys. One of them, he's noticing for the first time, is slightly brighter than the others. Newer, maybe. A lighter shade of brass, less dulled by people's fingertips, by the mechanisms of the lock.

Oh. If Shane had noticed that sooner, he would have remembered which door it goes to. He and Ilya have had such a hard time remembering which one goes where. Shane could have even made it into a game, between them, a bet. *Hey, if I guess which key goes in which lock, I get to do whatever I want to you.* A little deceptive, since he would remember which lock the brightest key was for, but Ilya wouldn't mind. And Ilya would probably have laughed at him, at his pointless competitiveness, and agreed anyway, and both of them would have won, no matter who got it right.

It's pointless to do so now, though. It's pointless to notice at all, just when they aren't going to need them anymore.

Ilya says, "So we go back. One more night, we leave in the morning. But we can still have one more day in Paris together."

It is, probably, a really flimsy excuse. There are other ways to get Marie her keys back: overnight mail, some emails to Airbnb customer support. If Shane was forced to defend it to, say, an irate Montreal management team, he would struggle to explain himself.

But paper thin though it is, it is enough to flood his body with immediate relief. The curdled ball of tension in his stomach melts into something he can catch his breath around. He tumbles forward into Ilya, eyes burning treacherously, throat heavy and choked, and kisses him hard.

Shane says, "Okay. Okay."

Ilya's fingers feel wet as they streak across his cheeks, so Shane must be fucking crying.

He doesn't care. He doesn't care about anything, except getting back to Paris with Ilya, except having a few more hours, an afternoon, a day, to still spend together.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, then," Shane says.

"Yes."

The one and only silver lining, Shane thinks, is they don't have to rely on trains to get back. Planes are back in the air; there is a flight in a little over two hours from Moscow to Paris, which will get them back by early afternoon. Ilya handles the tickets, saying he will call Svetlana to work another miracle if he has to, but they are able to find business class seats on the surprisingly empty flight without having to pull more dubiously legal strings. They pack their bags quickly, clumsily; Shane is going to have a big pile of wrinkled clothes to sift through back home, which is probably the least of his worries right now, and he's annoyed at himself for even thinking about it.

Shane finds himself gone quiet in the cab, in the airport, at the gate. He doesn't really know how to act here without the pretense of a funeral, and his only guide to conducting himself appropriately is Ilya, who he apparently cannot feel neutral sitting beside anymore. He aches to touch him in wholly incriminating ways. If he tries to look at him, Shane finds himself staring, drinking in Ilya's handsome face, letting his eyes follow the slope of his brow and his crooked nose, linger on his moles and trace the curve of his pouted lips.

The clenching pain in his chest has remained, rather steadfastly, because Shane can't turn off his brain for one second of his life. All he can think about, even though they are boarding a flight back to Paris to borrow another day together, is the part after this. The next day. The flights home. Leaving Ilya. Every cell in his body feels like it's screaming at him to do something, to stop it from happening somehow.

Ilya is quiet, too. When he looks at Shane, he gives him a tense smile for half a second, before his face flattens out into something more like misery, his eyes pitched downwards, unable to settle on him for more than a second or two before looking away, mostly at the floor or his lap or the black screen of his phone.

They settle into their seats after the plane boards. Business class is deserted, which is good for Shane's nerves, but the flight attendant gives them far too much attention as a result. Shane thinks she must recognize Ilya, because she smiles too wide when he gives her almost nothing back, just nodding her away every few minutes. She brings him vodka. No ginger ale on the flight, so Shane gets sparkling water that he doesn't even really want.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow they have to say goodbye. Tomorrow he's going back to Montreal, and Ilya to Boston. Theriault is going to call when he gets the news and demand Shane's itinerary as soon as possible. Shane's mom is going to expect the same.

"We have to buy our tickets," Shane says.

"Okay. But we are on a plane right now, yes? It can wait until we are home."

The word *home*, it turns out, can hit as hard as a fist in the right circumstances.

They take off. Shane closes his eyes and leans back into the headrest and lets the rumble of the embarking plane reverberate through his body, rattle his teeth. It is stupid to feel safer once they are in the air, but he is so fucking glad to put Russia behind him. He doesn't even care to watch out the window as the snowy ground and grey buildings shrink away and are swallowed up by clouds. He listens to the engine roar and tries to think about absolutely fucking nothing for as long as he can, for as long as the noise is louder than his thoughts.

It's impossible, of course, but he manages to put it off for an hour or so. Then, the thoughts of *tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow* manage to scream over the engine. He powers on his phone and connects to the plane Wi-Fi and starts scrolling Monday's flights from Paris to Montreal. There are a distressing number of options. Looks like a normal schedule, everything back to its original programming.

"What are you doing?" Ilya says, but he's looking at Shane's screen from across the wide console between them, so he knows what Shane is doing.

"I can't think about anything else unless I buy my ticket. I'm just going to be thinking about buying it."

"Can you even buy, with this Wi-Fi?"

"Yes." He looks at Ilya. "Can you look, too?"

"Shane."

"Can you please look, Ilya? I don't... I want to go to the airport together."

Ilya blows out a breath, looks at Shane for a long time. "Fine."

They scroll the options in silence. Occasionally, they show each other the screen, lining up itineraries. They decide wordlessly on an early afternoon Boston flight, one-thirty PM. There is a three PM Montreal flight that Shane can still get a first-class seat for.

He watches Ilya purchase the ticket.

His eyes have not really stopped prickling since eight that morning. His stomach has not stopped churning. Seeing the ticket confirmation on Ilya's screen does not help either of those problems, but it's a little like the pain of a rotten tooth getting pulled: at least it's done.

Shane buys his ticket, the remaining rotten tooth that needed yanking out, so his mind can now at least go blank and miserable. He puts his phone in his pocket, then pulls his hoodie up over his head and pillows his face in the cave where his arm rests on the console.

Ilya puts his hand heavily down on the back of Shane's head.

"Do you feel better?"

"Obviously not."

"But it's done, now."

"Yeah."

"Shanya. Let me see you."

Shane rolls his head out of the dark and peers sideways up at Ilya. Ilya's eyes look so sad. Which sucks, Shane hates it, hates the sadness. But also, at least he's not alone. At least Ilya

is miserable with him. At least it looks like this is fucking killing him, too.

Ilya scratches lightly at Shane's head through the fabric of his hoodie. He scans around the cabin to make sure no one is watching them. Shane can't see anything from his vantage point except Ilya's face.

It seems, from Ilya's expression, that they're in the clear. He turns back to Shane. Runs his thumb over Shane's nose, across his mouth, back and forth a little. Shane's lips are dry and Ilya's thumb catches there, friction that Shane wants to swipe his tongue out to wet away, as impossible and dangerous as that is to do in public. But he doesn't stop Ilya from touching him, either. As if he could, when he could instead collect this moment, the soft pressure of Ilya's finger against his lips, place it alongside all the other ones in his heart, now that he knows there are so few opportunities left for more of them.

Ilya gives him a tiny, crooked smile that doesn't really match the look in his eyes. "Tell me a story."

"Ilya."

Shane doesn't think he can, not like they've been doing. Not even like Ilya asked him to on the train. It's a matter of self-preservation, of knowing what you can and cannot survive. They drill it into you, which injuries you can skate on with some creative bandaging and weight compensation, and which will result in an IR catastrophe if they are aggravated. This has to be the latter: a full dislocation, a bad break, a lodged bullet that Ilya is asking him to push in deeper.

"What did it say?" Ilya says.

Shane doesn't understand what he means. He thinks maybe he means the article about flights starting up again. Obviously, it didn't say anything good, because they're on a plane right now and they just bought tickets for two more. He doesn't want to pull out his phone and read the stupid article again.

He looks up to Ilya and shakes his head.

"What did what say?"

Ilya runs his finger across the bridge of Shane's nose again, grazes his knuckles over Shane's cheek. Shane turns his head into Ilya's touch, automatic, as instinctive as breathing, and a little less ruinous in the air en route to France than it was in a Moscow underpass. Then, Ilya puts his big hand, palm up, on the console, taps it against the plastic. When Shane doesn't move, Ilya says, "Give."

"Ilya."

"Shane, please." Ilya flexes his fingers in a little beckoning motion.

It is objectively reckless, objectively stupid. If the flight attendant decides to come back and see if Ilya's glass needs topping up, or wants something signed, or wants to flirt some more,

this will be totally compromising. They might land in Paris to a picture of them holding hands going viral on Twitter and fuck both of their lives up. Shane also wants to hold Ilya's hand so badly that it might kill him. He doesn't know which of these instincts is correct anymore. He doesn't know if he can withstand the sort of distance he's always worked so hard to maintain between them right now, anyway, so both options are probably fatal.

He lifts his head from his arm, so he isn't twisted into a weird position, and so he can slip two of his fingers between two of Ilya's.

Ilya says, "The ring you bought for me. What did it say?"

Oh, Shane thinks, and has to close his eyes. He can't look directly at Ilya right now, not while they are talking about this, not while he's ignoring all medical advice and aggravating already grave injuries.

He wants it all too badly, as badly as Ilya wants it. All of these little made-up stories. Who their best man would be, and what food they would serve, and whether they would get a band or a DJ, and a million other trivial, precious things that will never happen and that Shane wants more than anything else.

Why isn't that enough? Why isn't wanting something more than he's ever wanted anything, more than maybe even this fucking sport, enough to get it?

Shane loves hockey more than any other player he knows. He wants to play until he is a decrepit forty-five years old. He wants another five Stanley Cups and an impossible two-thousand more points. He wants to fill another three trophy rooms in his house. He wants his number retired across the league when he's finally done with this game. He wants Hollander and hockey to mean the same thing until the end of time.

And, even more acutely, Shane wants Ilya forever. Not on the phone or in hotel rooms or in post-game interviews furtively caught on TV, watched with his hand down his pants and the volume up so he can catch the deepest curl of Ilya's voice. Not the dregs of him Shane can skim off the top of a hockey career that takes and takes from them both. He wants Ilya with him all the time. In his bed, a shared bed, a shared house, a shared life.

That is the smallest he can make his want, and it is still so huge, so encompassing, that he can't make it make sense in his head. He wants Ilya's entire life, his love, his blistering desire. He wants the tiny smile on his face when Shane glances up at him in the morning gloom, he wants the steady beating of his heart where Shane rests his head at night. Every night, a hundred thousand of them, a lifetime's worth of them.

There isn't enough space on any wedding ring for all of that. What could it possibly say?

"It said 'I love you forever'."

Ilya squeezes Shane's fingers.

"Ah. Yes. I remember now."

They are quiet together, the rest of the flight, Ilya's hand on his even when he's looking away. Shane's mind spins and spins, like tires straining uselessly in mud.

Giving up Ilya is impossible. But Shane can't give up hockey, either. He just can't. Ilya knows this. Ilya would never even ask him to.

But how can he have both? How can he play twenty more years of this fucking game when he can't imagine living without Ilya for another five? What does he do? What do either of them do?

The plane touches down at Charles de Gaulle and he still doesn't know. They climb into the Uber and Ilya wraps his arm around Shane, pulls him close across the seat, and he still doesn't know. They watch rain track across the window and the painfully familiar Paris skyline materialize into view, and Shane still doesn't know.

The brightest key on the keychain goes to the iron gate. Shane commits it to memory, because it's important. He may have to give it back tomorrow, the key and the memory alike, but it's still important. All of it is.

They are wet and tired and upset, dragging their suitcases back into the squat little elevator, riding up to their floor. One more time, the last time.

Shane can't stand it. He's just learned which of the keys goes to the door outside. This can't be the last time. And there are things they haven't done, right? There is still something left in this city for them, something for Paris to offer, isn't there? They said they would go to more museums. There are more statues, more paintings of dogs waiting to fill up all the storage on Ilya's phone. They still haven't seen Notre Dame.

Shane has no fucking idea what to do about hockey, or his life, or Ilya. Or Montreal, or Boston. Or the ticket confirmation in this email, or the volcano, or Ilya's family, or the ten grand Ilya is going to give Polina, or how Nataly might never be told that Uncle Ilya loves her enough to take care of her from across the world. Or this big open wound in Shane's heart, this anticipatory ache for Ilya. Still here, but Shane is hurting like he's gone already.

Shane doesn't know how to make any of it fit together, package it into something surmountable. Something survivable.

But he can at least make sure Ilya sees fucking Notre Dame before they leave.

They don't really talk after the plane. Shane is thinking, and Ilya can tell there's something like a hurricane, an interior storm wreaking havoc in Shane's mind, because he's totally shut down on the outside, like a boarded up house in a tornado alley. But the water has seeped in all the same, glossing his eyes, peeling up the corners, twisting a grimace into his mouth. He stares out the window the whole Uber ride home, as if it's fascinating to watch water race

along the glass and count cars in the traffic. Even in the elevator up to the apartment, Shane won't meet Ilya's eyes, like no matter what he said on the train about his poker skills, he knows how easy he is to read, knows all it will take is for Ilya to get one good look at him to know exactly what he's thinking.

Ilya is also quiet. He has been thinking, too. Since the morning, or before. Maybe since the funeral. Maybe before that. Maybe, if he has to be honest, he has been thinking the same thing for days, or weeks, before the volcano, before he was really able to confront it. Even when he thought Shane would never speak to him again, maybe it was already there.

He's thinking that he loves his team, he loves the adoration of his city, may even love Boston itself. Sixteen years without a Cup, and he turned it around in five. He can see the future stretching out, ten years, fifteen years, a career in the city that raised him, and it looks like the sort of immortality that generational runs have, a history that sometimes can only be written when the team and the player are perfectly aligned, a single brain precisely tuned to mutual greatness. In that future, he can see deep playoff runs and multiple cup wins and MVP trophies and the hall of fame. He can see the glory that might match Shane's image of him, that towering Roman god with its wings outstretched in eternal victory. And that is a life that he would, maybe, also love.

But it is a future that would ask him to choose. Love or glory. Weeks on the road, all of his focus and his health and his time and his attention on the game, on the team, on the city. Hockey is a sport that requires its own sort of devotion, to the exclusion of maybe all other interests, all other infatuations. Everything else must be put to the side, deprioritized, made second, distantly, at best. Ilya would have to choose that glory in order to attain it. It would not just be coincidentally bestowed on him.

And he loves Shane more than any of that. He knows which one he would choose.

They stagger into the apartment. Ilya wants to shrug off his wet coat, kick off his shoes, and collapse into Shane's arms and stay there until tomorrow morning, until they are forced to move by alarm clocks and ticket reservations and boarding times and impersonal, inescapable fate. That seems like the best use of their time right now: crawl up inside of each other and lock themselves away in this apartment.

But Shane makes no move to remove his coat or shoes, or step further inside. He deposits his bag in the entryway and stands expectantly there, like Ilya ought to read his mind. Sometimes, Ilya thinks he can. If that's true, then what Shane is thinking, in Ilya's opinion, is pretty fucking stupid: Shane wants to go out again. Even though it is, objectively, not a day for sightseeing, even though there are barely two or three hours of daylight left for them, and what is there is a bleak and grey smear of obscured sun that will slowly bleed away to black. Even though every hour not in the apartment is an hour they will spend not touching, or not touching in the way Ilya wants to, as much as he can for as long as he has left. Ilya would have thought Shane wanted this, too. To use their time a little more fucking wisely than that.

Ilya sighs. "Let's stay inside," he says, like maybe this will be enough to change Shane's mind.

Shane's voice is flat, though it seems it takes him effort to keep it that way. "No. I want to go to Notre Dame."

Ilya could laugh. Who fucking cares about Notre Dame?

"Why?"

"Because it's what you said. You said Notre Dame, so let's go."

"Shane, it's just a place," Ilya says, and has the irrational thought that he wishes he could make Shane take him *less* seriously, sometimes. "I do not care where we go."

"Good." Shane is staring at the door. "Then let's go to Notre Dame."

Ilya blows out his breath. They do not have to do this. God, unless Shane wants to say something that he feels like he can't, in the apartment. Something that he doesn't want the memory of this place to be marred by, maybe.

If that's the case, then Ilya would also like to get the fuck out of here.

"Okay. Fine. Let's go to Notre Dame and get wet and cold."

Shane nods, like this is exactly what he wants to do. "Come on."

It is a miserable day for this, Ilya thinks, as they bundle out of the Uber, just beyond the Place Jean-Paul II. They must be the only two people stupid and sad enough to be tourists today. The continuing rain, a weak and petulant drizzle, is still cold and persistent enough to soak them through, catch in Ilya's hair and weigh down his coat. He's almost wet and confused enough to be angry at Shane for this. He jams his hands deep into his pockets and trudges toward the cathedral.

But there are other people here, to Ilya's surprise. Tourists with their cameras out and street vendors drawn like carrion flies to easy pickings, and cars and bicycles and buses swirling in the streets around the plaza. And in the middle of it is Notre Dame itself, towering over its island in the Seine like an ancient, long-reigning king.

It's almost too busy with detail, too ornate, like the architect could not decide on just one extravagance, and chose to do it all: gargoyles and stained glass and fractaled windows and a pantheon of saints peering out of stone into the grey rain. It makes Ilya's eye stutter when he tries to pin down one thing to take in at a time. It is only when he lets his gaze go slack and unfocused that can he really view it in totality, like looking through the lens of a kaleidoscope at the whole swirling pattern. Grandiose, and beautiful, and a little bleak.

Condensation plumes up from the river with the rain, rolling across the plaza, obscuring the other tourists and the two of them alike, blanketing everything with a strange sheen of unreality, like they are standing out of time, stuck somewhere between their current misery and some other rainy day, hundreds of years in the past. Probably, this is what it looked like then, too, one or two or eight hundred years ago. Just as imposing, just as ornate. No wonder Victor Hugo chose this giant monument for his own tragic, impossible love affair.

Ah, Ilya thinks, now it makes a little more sense why they are here. Notre Dame certainly looks sturdy enough to house their own small tragedy. Maybe Shane is hoping that the cathedral will throw open its doors for them. Or, maybe, he intends to ask Ilya to take all of this, all of what has happened between them, and leave it here.

They stand in the fog of the plaza and stare up at the cathedral for a while, wet and cold, wetter and colder by the minute.

“It’s very nice,” Ilya says.

“Yeah. Beautiful.”

“Do you want to go inside?”

Shane shakes his head. “No.”

Ilya watches Shane stare at the cathedral, and waits. Shane looks like he’s trying as hard as he can to keep his expression neutral, but Ilya can see something start to work its way out of him, his breath building up into big waves, his eyes going dark, swimming enough to reflect a little of the stonework back in them.

If it’s coming, Ilya thinks, it’s coming now. The apology that Ilya doesn’t want and doesn’t think he can hear. Shane saying he’s thought about it, but this is too hard. Or, it was a nice little fantasy, but they need to get serious now, because hockey needs them more than they need each other.

Ilya will take it, if it comes. Maybe nod his head and say, *Okay, Shane, I understand*. And then he’ll throw himself into the Seine and sink permanently to the bottom.

Shane says, “I can’t quit hockey.”

“Shane. Who is telling you to quit hockey?”

“Well, I don’t know what else to fucking do, Ilya.”

He takes a big breath in, looks sidelong at Ilya, lashes wet. Probably the rain, Ilya thinks. Probably. The misery starts to creep into Shane’s face again, mouth curling down, eyes pooling and going black, irises retreating to mere fingernail edges. Dark, and so sad. Ilya hates it. Even if this conversation ends with Ilya at the bottom of a river, he doesn’t want Shane to look like this, ever.

Shane says, “I don’t know what to do. How do we go back? I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to, either.”

“Then what do we do?” Shane says this to the massive stone archways, the towering belfrys dotted with gargoyles, their mouths fixed uselessly open, the million fucking silent saints who stare back at them, like they know the answer. Like they have anything to say back.

Ilya's wild, impossible thoughts say, *We throw all of it away. We stay here and we let those seats sit empty on the flights tomorrow and we never, ever look back. I marry you and we keep the apartment and you teach me how to speak French, and we spend the rest of our lives in blissful obscurity.*

Ilya says, instead, "We do what people do when they are far away from each other. We are not the first people to have a long-distance relationship, Shane."

But Shane shakes his head, like this is the dumbest thing Ilya has ever said. "Those people don't love each other as much as I love you."

The smile breaks over Ilya's face the same way a sob might, if things went slightly differently. Might still tip over that way, if Ilya lets himself go.

"Fuck, Shane."

"I'm sorry," Shane says quietly, though he doesn't sound it. "I know I'm being stupid."

"Not stupid, Shane," Ilya says, and looks at him, and thinks, maybe a little stupid, but mostly very, very wonderful and beloved and precious. "Look, I will call you every night, okay? Even if all you say to me is good night, and then you hang up."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. And Montreal and Boston are not so far from each other. Not even two hours by plane, yes? So we can see each other whenever we have time."

"You would do that?"

Okay, maybe pretty stupid, actually.

"Shane. I am very rich. I can afford a lot of plane tickets. So can you."

Shane laughs, almost a real one, only slightly tinged with hysteria. Ilya is describing exactly what *people who don't love each other as much as we love each other* might do. And Shane is right, it probably won't be enough for the enormity of this, for everything they are. This miserable and terrifying and beautiful *thing* will not be sustained by mere scraps, by phone calls and stolen pieces of days.

But Ilya has at least one more desperate bid to offer Shane.

Ilya says, "And then, next year I am free agent, okay? I will look for somewhere closer to you to play. So then it is only for two more years. Not forever."

Shane turns to him, finally, eyes shining and reddened and big and hopeful. So hopeful that it's briefly blinding, how raw he looks, how precarious. Like Ilya saying the wrong thing could shatter him, smash him into a million pieces and leave him strewn across the Place Jean-Paul II.

It breaks Ilya's heart, that Shane should look so shocked that Ilya would do this for him. Ilya should have told him this so much sooner. Should have figured it out himself years ago.

Maybe they are both stupid. Probably, they are.

"You would leave Boston?" Shane says, like he still can't understand. Or maybe desperately does not want to misunderstand. Wants to make sure he is hearing exactly what Ilya means to say.

And what else can Ilya say, but the most patently obvious thing? What else but the deepest truth of himself, held close before he even knew it to be true? It was there before Paris, waiting for him to discover it, carve it out of the miserable, calcified fears and defense mechanisms he's built inside of himself. Paris just made it corporeal, too urgent and overwhelming to ignore.

"I would go anywhere for you."

Shane closes his eyes, sudden and tight, face going hard like he's taken a punch. He blinks away from Ilya, staring up into the freezing sky. Ilya can see him considering the offer. Adding up minutes on the phone and hours in hotel rooms and days borrowed in each other's beds and making it match up to two years, make it something manageable. Something survivable.

"Okay," he says after a long while. "Okay. Two years..."

"Two years."

"Where would you go?" Shane says.

"Oh my god, Shane, I don't know! We can figure it out."

"Sorry," Shane says quickly, "Okay. Sorry. Yeah."

His eyes search all over Ilya's face, mapping the topography of his expression, always returning to Ilya's eyes, like he can't be compelled away from them for all that long. His lip dips in and he catches it between his teeth, strong enough to prevent it from trembling, stronger than Ilya, probably, because he must look like he is on the verge of collapsing.

Shane says, "I'm going to miss you so fucking much."

"I think I will miss you even more," Ilya says.

He looks around the wet promenade at the oblivious tourists and this big, beautiful church that he doesn't want to spend one more minute crying in front of.

"Okay, this is very nice place, but can we go home now? I need to kiss you very badly and if I do it here you will have panic attack and die."

Shane laughs and then he's turning to Ilya, and reaching for him, arms wide, and all of the safety of distance between them collapses, and he's pulling Ilya so close, right here out in the

street, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck, burying his face against Ilya's wet coat.

It feels like a dream, the latest and maybe final one of all the walking hallucinations pulled from the most desperate reaches of Ilya's mind. So for a moment, he doesn't react, just goes stiff as Shane falls against him like there is no one here to witness them, no huddles of soggy tourists and loitering teenagers and street vendors perched under dripping awnings to see.

"Shane?"

"Don't kiss me out here, okay?" Shane mumbles against Ilya's collar. "But I want to do this. I have to do this while I still can."

Ilya finds the nerve endings in his fingers, the parts of his brain that allow him to move, and he wraps his arms around Shane, grips desperately into his soaked hair.

"No promises."

"Asshole."

"I love you, Shanya."

"I love you more."

"No, this is not possible."

Ilya tightens his fingers in the slippery mess of Shane's hair, too tight, probably, but he's overcome. The street and its inhabitants move impassively around them, oblivious, distracted by the grandiosity of Notre Dame, swayed instead toward the melancholy beauty of Paris rising up all around this foggy island.

It seems like, in comparison, there is nothing all that interesting about the two of them, clutching each other above the slick asphalt of this sweeping plaza. A nice little parting gift from the city, a final moment of blissful obscurity for them to hide inside. Who knows when they might have it again?

The Uber driver gives them a withering look as they drip water all over his backseat, but all Ilya sees is Shane. His big brown eyes swim over Ilya, his cold fingers wrap themselves in Ilya's over the seat, right up until they tumble out of the car outside 11 *Rue DuBois*. One more time, up to their apartment. The creaking iron gate, the impossibly slow elevator, the front door, the rug always waiting for their soggy shoes. Ilya will remember all of this, long after he has no use for it. And then, what will he remember most vividly? The couch, or Shane stretched out across it? The kitchen counter, or Shane's smile as he passes Ilya a protein shake? The bed, or Shane's body, Shane's breath, Shane's whispered *I love you*, choked around his orgasm?

This apartment is just an apartment. It's Shane that's made it into this: precious, and safe. Somewhere more like home than Ilya has ever known before.

Shane drops to his knees in the entryway and takes Ilya in his mouth, and watches him the whole time, grabs for the hand Ilya plants around his jaw and closes his fingers around it,

thwarts whatever attempt Ilya has at making anything hot and turns it devastating instead. Another image for Ilya's mind to catalog and squirrel away, like a jewel in a closely guarded vault.

Ilya pulls Shane off with a wet *pop* that makes his head spin to push him into the bedroom, tugging at layers, leaving wet clothes in a trail along the way. Shane mercifully does not say anything about the effect this will have on the herringbone floor, just licks into Ilya's mouth and sprawls across the bed and lets Ilya press down along his entire body, lets Ilya knee apart his legs and spread his thighs wide and sink spit-soaked fingers into his tight hole, finger him open, spear him on his hand. Shane offers himself up to be licked and sucked and squeezed, and begs for Ilya's dick, the words scooped out of Shane's mouth with Ilya's tongue and swallowed down Ilya's throat.

Ilya loves him. Loves him in a way that is written in his DNA, carried like oxygen through his bloodstream. There is no other choice for him. He will love Shane until the day he dies, and then probably he will become a sad, lonely ghost, following Shane around the earth, because Ilya can't see how this love could ever be extinguished, even in death.

Ilya fucks Shane slow, Shane's dick growing hot and heavy as it bobs up toward Ilya's stomach, his hands groping down Ilya's back, until Shane cries for him to go harder, more, to give him everything, and Ilya pistons his hips until Shane rattles apart and comes all over both of them, shouting his name and pulling Ilya's orgasm out of him like a booming thunderclap over the city, making his vision white out, his brain momentarily tuned to static, all of the grey matter covered by ash.

They lay panting in the ruins of the sheets, coming back to themselves, and wordlessly turn back to each other, fall back into each other's bodies again, so that it won't end, this final, perfect evening. Shane falls apart under Ilya's fingers and tongue a second time, then pushes Ilya on his back and sucks his cock, Ilya's hand rough on the back of Shane's head, holding him in place. They are shaky and unsteady after that, and end up lying side by side, fucking each other's fisted hands and kissing the whole time, laughing into each other's mouths.

It's not enough, of course, to tide Ilya over; it will never be enough. He will miss this like breathing air, come this time tomorrow.

He thinks, two years. Two years is only so many days. Twenty-four months. It will pass. It will pass.

Shane sends his itinerary to his parents and coach and tosses his phone to a corner of the bed and closes his eyes. Ilya runs the back of his finger along Shane's cheek.

"Shane."

"Yeah?"

"Come here."

Ilya pulls him out of bed, Shane coming slow, eyes somewhere off of Ilya's face. He steers them to the shower, lets the hot water cascade over them both, holds Shane in his arms and

lets him lean hard into him. Gets him dressed in sweats and directs him out of the bedroom with a hand warm against the back of his neck.

“Eiffel Tower will be lighting up soon, I think.”

Shane makes a noncommittal noise and slumps into one of the stools in the kitchen, a big show of misery. Authentic misery, sure, but he wants Ilya to know it, too. Lucky for him Ilya loves him, every doe-eyed, blistering, breathtaking part of him. Including how fucking dramatic he is.

“Shane.”

Shane looks up at him without lifting his head, through his thick lashes.

“You should eat,” Ilya says. Apparently he becomes someone’s mother in times of deep melancholy.

“I don’t want to.”

And now Ilya turns the kitchen island and grabs onto Shane by his shoulders and kisses him until Shane’s soft, pouting mouth feels less sad under Ilya’s lips, until he takes in Ilya’s tongue and gets wet and warm inside for him.

“Better?” Ilya says. Shane’s eyes stay on his mouth, even when he pulls away to speak.

“Hm.”

“Good.” Ilya says, and then the lights come on outside, and he drags Shane to the doors and pulls them both out onto the terrace. He doesn’t pause to retrieve his coat, where his final cigarette awaits in its lonely carton, bereft of all its friends. He stands with Shane on the freezing damp tile and wraps his arms all the way around him, and doesn’t really feel the cold at all. How could he, with Shane so close against him?

The Eiffel Tower goes gold and white, sparkling and blinking on and off, riotous with color, and Ilya wonders if he’ll remember it a year from now, five years from now, ten years from now. Or if what he will remember is Shane’s warmth against him, Shane’s hands snaked up under his sweatshirt, splayed along his back. Shane’s lips, gasping apart when Ilya kisses him. No offense to *Monsieur Eiffel*, Ilya thinks. It’s just that Ilya has never known anything that can take his attention away from Shane for long.

The light show finishes. They pile back inside, bare feet leaving wet imprints by the door, which Shane grimaces at, finally mindful again of the wood becoming warped. He must be feeling a little better, then, to find something to nag at.

Ilya goes to the fridge. Behind the remaining groceries that he supposes he will need to tell Marie about, there is the unopened bottle of champagne, optimistically gifted in case of a special occasion.

Ilya pulls it out and presents it to Shane.

“What’s that for?” Shane says.

“To celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

Ilya looks at him, trying on a face meant to convey *are you stupid?* but it quickly slips into fondness. Ilya may be losing his touch, just a little.

“It’s our honeymoon.”

Shane chokes out a little laugh. His expression teeters up and down, happy to sad, a see-saw that Ilya worries he has accidentally pushed too far from what he wants.

Then, Shane gives Ilya a tiny, resolute nod, but his eyes are swimming, soft. “Let’s drink this fucking champagne, then.”

By the end of the night, they are both smiling.

Chapter End Notes

pats roof of fic This bad boy can fit so much yearning in it!

Thank you for reading! I can't believe we're at the home stretch of this fic, this is by far the longest piece of writing I've ever done, and to have so many people following along and enjoying it and commenting and recommending it is really unbelievable, as in I literally have trouble conceptualizing that so many people are reading something I wrote and put on the internet 😊 I hope you'll stick with me for the rest of the ride! I promise this fic has a happy ending, we just gotta feel some feelings along the way.

As always, can't wait for your thoughts on the story, I hope Ao3 doesn't mark everything spam or crash again like it has managed to do the last few Fridays when I posted updates. Come find me on tumblr too, [@scacao-blog](#). See you next week!

Chapter 12: Nothing like a dream to create the future

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane say goodbye to Paris.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Title is from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.

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

Paris greets them one last time with a grey, boiling sky, just cracking daylight and shaking off the clinging night. The Eiffel Tower is more or less a metallic scratch against the clouds, like charcoal harshly smudged over grey pastels. There will be rain today, surely, Ilya thinks. He wonders if they will still be here to see it, or if they will both already be sailing through the sky by the time the downpour starts.

Shane is cradled around him, heavy and sticky, a radiator run over-hot. Ilya has spent a week waking up sweatier than he ever has in his life, and when he wakes up tomorrow and finds himself cold, he knows it's going to hit him like a high stick, a cheap shot to the ribs. But that is tomorrow, not today. Today, Shane is still here with him, in their dark, warm, wonderful bedroom.

Maybe Ilya shouldn't wake him just because he preemptively feels the pull of missing him. It's rather selfish. They drank the whole bottle of champagne last night, half in the kitchen, Ilya's arms curled around Shane's waist, Shane's thighs planted between Ilya's knees where they were hitched up on the bar stool. Then, finished it on the couch, Shane so worried about spilling on the bouclé or the nice coffee table that he didn't even notice Ilya crawl between his legs and coax another giggling orgasm out of him, bubbles still fizzing on Ilya's tongue when he swallowed. Shane was tipsy and happy when he fell asleep in Ilya's arms, mission accomplished, mind successfully distracted. And Ilya's brain felt fuzzy and warm enough, too, that he fended off the sadness long enough to pass out. So maybe he should let Shane sleep off the alcohol a little more.

But Shane stirs, even before Ilya is finished deliberating. He hums, a little beloved sound against Ilya's collarbone, dry lips pressed to Ilya's skin. Another thing that Ilya will remember when its absence tomorrow feels like losing a limb. He is going to miss all of this, the tiniest things maybe the most of all, the unconscious bits of Shane that he's memorized in Paris.

God, he was hoping not to be so sad, so soon.

He reaches for Shane, hands catching on his jaw, wrapping around the back of his head, running over the prickly buzzed edges of his hair. Shane goes with him, rises from his chest, meets him at the head of the bed where Ilya can press their mouths together. He hooks a leg around the back of Shane's knees and flips them, puts Shane on his back with his dark hair against Ilya's pillow and licks a hot line into his mouth. Kisses him until he feels Shane's dick hard on his thigh, kisses him more. Palms Shane's thick tits and presses his thumbs hard against Shane's nipples, until Shane's breath thins and catches around Ilya's tongue, until he's running fingernails down Ilya's back and gripping into him with bruising desperation.

They don't talk. Ilya doesn't have any words that he thinks he can say without the misery waterlogging them, rendering them sad and soggy, and he doesn't want that to be the way he remembers fucking Shane in Paris for the last time. He wants Shane's taut breath and his moans swallowed down Ilya's throat and the wet sound of Ilya pushing his dick inside, the frantic slap of thighs to thighs, and if they don't talk while Ilya fucks him, then he can just keep kissing him the whole time. Everything he needs to say can be said just like that, just mouths crashing together again and again.

There isn't enough time, after, for the sort of mornings they have had, Shane wrapped up in the sticky bedsheets, squinting at texts he's never going to reply to, and Ilya sneaking off for a preliminary cigarette and crawling back into bed after, swallowing down Shane's complaints about the stink of smoke. Not enough time for *You love it*, and *No, I really fucking don't*, and *But you love me*, and *Yeah, I really fucking do*.

Instead, they shower, they dry off, they brush their teeth, they sweep their toiletries off the vanity for the last time. They throw their clothes back into their suitcases, or Ilya throws and Shane does a lot of folding and separating dirty and clean and Ilya knows he's probably going to toss it all in the wash, regardless, but he watches him do it anyway and feels so fond that it threatens to overtake him.

Shane clears off the kitchen counter and loads the dishwasher— *dishwasher*, not *washing-machine*, always confused with the Russian, and Shane always finding it meanly hilarious—and Ilya means to help, but he gets caught up in staring out the french doors at the Eiffel Tower and its surrounding clutch of identical buildings, at the million tiny windows and boxy Mansard roofs and snaking chimneys, and is momentarily frozen there, long enough that Shane comes around him and pulls him close, kissing the side of his neck, and stands watching with him too a while.

It is the last good look Ilya gets at Paris, the last one he can stand. He finds himself unable to turn around the last time they close the door behind them, pushing their suitcases out to the elevator. He lets the door shut without looking again. Is afraid, maybe, that if he does, he's going to try to beg to stay.

They wait for Marie on the cold street outside. She had not pressed Ilya on the phone about why they might be leaving early, which he is grateful for, and she doesn't press when she pulls her car into a spot in front of the building and greets them both with little left-right-left cheek kisses, like they are old friends who are meeting again, or like they are her young relatives that she is seeing off.

Ilya slides the keys off of the metal ring, until *I Heart Paris* is the only thing left behind, dangling nakedly, bereft of purpose. Marie dutifully takes them and puts them into her pocket with a little sigh, stands on the street between them, looking back and forth at them both, not much left to say.

“Ah, well. I hope everything was very nice for you while you were here,” she says, looking at Ilya, then looking at Shane, who is looking at nothing, staring down the *Rue DuBois* with no particular focus, his mouth turned over. If she’s worried about a good review, Ilya thinks, she doesn’t have to be. He plans to write this place a fucking sonnet, as much as he can get away with without violating some community guidelines on appropriate language. *Excellent bed, would fuck in it forever if we could*, probably not allowed. A shame. People really ought to know.

“It was wonderful,” Ilya says sincerely. “Thank you.”

“Well, yes. Thank you, too. Take care of yourselves, hm?”

Something in the way she says it, the way her eyes cast over Ilya’s expression, makes him wonder just how much she’s caught on to. Maybe they are just impossible to misread, today at the beginning of this long, miserable goodbye.

“Thank you,” he says again.

And then she is gone, packing herself back into her car and pattering off down the criminally narrow street. And there is nothing left for them to do but call their ride, too. The apartment is locked, the doors are shut, the lights are turned off. They’ve stripped the sheets, like good houseguests. They’ve left the used towels folded on the vanity. The little knickknacks arranged on the coffee table that Ilya liked to kick off when he put his feet up to drive Shane crazy are all back in their pre-determined places. As if neither of them had spent any time at all curled up on the couch together, Shane’s legs thrown over Ilya’s outstretched ones, TV on with the volume low. Everything is back to how it was before they were ever there, and it’s not theirs anymore, it’s back to being someone’s next vacation.

And soon someone new will open up the door, suitcases in hand, weary from the travel, jet lagged and shaky, and see the view of the Eiffel Tower right from the entrance, and say, *Wow, this is incredible*, like they can even begin to know the half of it, of how incredible it could really be. How it could feel so warm in the middle of winter if you were there with Shane Hollander, his arms threaded around your body and his hair brushing soft against your chin, and you knew that you could turn your head just so and catch his lips with yours, and he would open for you so sweetly. They will see the picture postcard view and the beautiful floors and the hand-carved ceiling medallions and they will think, *Oh, gorgeous*, but they won’t know that what they are looking at is merely the afterimage of a much more beautiful and unforgettable thing, a poorly taken photo, too blurry to capture the true magnificence of its subject.

The ride to the airport is something like a war movie Ilya thinks he must have watched on a flight sometime, shell-shocked soldiers in ragged camo staring wordlessly out of the open hatch of a helicopter door. Certainly, that is how it feels to sit next to Shane in the backseat. His hoodie is up over his head and drawn protectively tight, strings getting chewed to shit

between his teeth. The hand that is not curled into Ilya's on the seat between them is jammed deep into his pocket. Shane watches out of the window as Paris flies by, sky threatening another bout of rain any moment, the slate-grey roofs already shining wetly from yesterday's shower, probably soggy to bursting, no more space for all the water to go.

And then they are out of the city, where the highway is fenced in on all sides by trees and there is not much to see beyond hastily scrawled graffiti and the impatient glare of other cars' headlights. It happens more quickly than Ilya is ready for. He thought they might face some of the interminable traffic that Paris is always beset by, that he might be able to run fingers over the back of Shane's hand a little longer and stare at his profile, pretty and sad, but they are at the airport far sooner than he expected, and then it's too risky for them to do so.

They take their bags from the eager driver, who carries them to the curb like a valet, like it's an imposition for a couple of professional athletes to lift two suitcases from the trunk under their own power. Ilya opens the app and tips him three hundred euros as they step inside the airport.

Charles de Gaulle is besieged by what seems like a million other travelers, probably all the other unfortunate souls stranded for a week who must now make their return to normal life alongside Ilya and Shane. How many of them have also come out of this exile fundamentally changed? Will anyone else also look up from time to time to see a volcano in the news or in a movie and think *Thank god, thank god that happened?*

They are spared the indignity of waiting on any of the massive, snaking check-in lines by the priority lanes that are available to anyone with the willingness to drop ten-thousand dollars on last minute first class seats. Then customs, security. Shane stares at the ground the entire time, unless explicitly told by someone in a uniform to look here, please, into the camera, thank you sir, have a nice flight.

And then there is time before Ilya's flight, too much of it maybe, enough time to do plenty of things in the airport except the one thing they both want to do. Ilya can't even kiss Shane here, can't even hold his hand, so there's not much point in being better than on time.

One more set of croissants at *Brioche Dorée*, two overpriced lattes, one of which Ilya has to practically force into Shane's hand and make him sip. None of it can hold a candle to even afternoon leftovers at *Victor Hugo*, but probably nothing will for the rest of Ilya's life. They perch at a couple of high stools that face outwards into the terminal while Ilya houses his breakfast and Shane chews listlessly on one golden pastry edge and looks as happy about it as getting hit with a brick.

"Shane, be nice to me please, I bought you these nice croissants and this nice coffee, so eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"What do you want then? A cigarette?" Shane glares at him. Ilya wipes the crumbs from his fingers with a tiny, paper-thin napkin that goes translucent from the grease. He squeezes Shane's shoulder and forces a smile, because one of them should at least try. "Come on. I still have one left."

Shane follows him down the long terminal until they find the smoking section at a far end, a little outdoor patch of gravel and haphazardly arranged trees in black planters. Shane stares at the ground like he's fascinated by the stomped-out cigarette butts littered around and the scuffed toes of his own sneakers. They are the only ones there, perhaps miraculously, and Ilya fears they won't be for very long, that this may be his only chance. He drags Shane around the side of one of the little potted trees, where they are obscured from view, and presses him against the wall and crashes their mouths together.

Ilya kisses him furiously, licking along the ridge of his teeth and holding him in place by the back of his neck. Shane melts into him, balls his fists up into Ilya's sweatshirt, then his hair, tugging him around without any clear direction except trying to get Ilya further into his mouth. More, more, enough that he will still be able to taste Shane when he has to say goodbye. Enough that he might forget, long enough to get on his plane, that it will be weeks before they do this again.

It is still not enough, when they finally pull away from each other, Shane looking about as wrecked as Ilya feels, but it will have to be. Ilya stares at Shane's red lips closing around his coffee cup as he lights up his final cigarette. It tastes bitter, the way Ilya likes, brushing up against the residual sweetness of the pastry and Shane's sweeter mouth. Bitter like coffee going cold in the frigid air because Shane's taken too long to drink it. Bitter like love reduced to one final, desperate kiss, over too soon, forced to hibernate in their raw and aching hearts.

Ilya is the one to have to leave first. They head to his gate instead of the lounge, which neither of them really seems up to locating right now. Shane collapses into one of the bolted-down seats, the frame creaking first for him and then again for Ilya as he sits down beside him.

For a while, they pretend to listen to gate announcements in French and English that echo in professionally pleasant tones up to the rafters of the giant terminal, twitchy with the want of each other, the desire to touch while they still can, which would be fine if only every single other person at this gate and this airport could just leave them be, turn away from them, give them some blissful privacy. Shane keeps his backpack protectively hunched over his knees, his hands digging hard into the front of it, like he's afraid it might get snatched away.

"I want to kiss you so bad," Shane says suddenly, putting his forehead down to his backpack, like he's battling a cramp, a stomachache. "I fucking hate this so much."

"I do, too."

"I hate that I have to say goodbye to you here and I can't even hold your hand."

Ilya wants to say, *Do it, fucking do it, please, please Shane. Kiss me at the gate and someone will take a picture and post it on Twitter and then the entire thing will be mercifully out of our hands.* His heart is too waterlogged, too bruised to care anymore. He's heading back to a city that he's already put into a box in his mind and started packing away in a moving truck. Two nights ago, he gazed into Shane's eyes on a freezing Moscow street and realized he was standing in his past and looking at his future. They can probably survive the risk of holding hands in the airport.

So Ilya reaches for Shane's backpack, pries it gently out of his white-knuckled hands, earning him a confused little look that temporarily disrupts the misery on Shane's face. Ilya wedges it between them, propped up by one of his legs and one of Shane's, a little fortress, a little hedge. He snakes his hand behind it, closes it around Shane's wrist, pulls his hand down into the little hiding place he's made for them, and laces their fingers together. Shane's eyes go big and dangerously soft, and he holds Ilya so tightly, tight enough to break him.

They talk a little. Shane occasionally breaks into a tiny smile when Ilya manages to be clever enough. Boarding starts, and Ilya just shakes his head a little when Shane looks at him expectantly. His seat will be waiting for him, long after economy is finished boarding and they are picking up only the stragglers.

Shane nods and squeezes his hand.

Another twenty minutes, at most, made rare again, already feeling like stolen time between them once more, and precious as gold. Ilya catalogs everything: Shane's brown eyes fixed on him. The strong column of Shane's neck. Shane's full lips and sad pout and freckles and freckles and freckles.

Finally, the line of travelers snaking out of the jet bridge has trickled to a faint stream, and wordlessly, they get up, and Shane's hand goes back in his pocket, and his backpack goes back over his shoulder, and he walks Ilya to the doors.

Another second. Another minute. They will call for final boarding soon, but Ilya can wait. Just to look at Shane like this. Just for a little longer.

And then, they are the only ones left, and Ilya has to go.

"Goodbye, Shane," he says. And then, because he can't leave without saying it one more time: "*Ya tebya lyubyu.*"

"Bye, Ilya," Shane says, and Ilya has to close his eyes a moment at the way Shane's voice breaks.

The walk down the jet bridge is cold. They don't run the heat through the temporary structure. And Ilya is cold, cold from the inside out, and it feels appropriate, cold compounding on cold, not a single thing warm except the palm of his hand where it held Shane's, the ghost of fingers between his. Even once he's in his seat, eyes closed so no one talks to him or looks at him, so no one lingers too long and sees the way this particular flavor of loneliness and want has decided to manifest on his face, his hand still burns.

Shane doesn't actually see Ilya disappear down the jet bridge, standing in the rows of emptied seats in front of the gate. He's looking, but he can't see. What he sees is the smear of helpless tears that cloud his vision, rob him of one final view of Ilya's golden hair and the

strong line of his back. When he runs a furious hand across his eyes to clear them, Ilya has already gone.

Shane forces himself away from the gate, away from the big windows where he can still see the plane to Boston. It's just, it suddenly doesn't feel like there's enough space here. It doesn't feel like he can breathe.

Shane doesn't know where to go, but he can't be inside. He walks, even though every cell in his body is screaming at him to turn around, run back to the gate, force his way down the jet bridge and onto Ilya's plane. It hasn't taken off yet, not for another fifteen minutes. The door is closed, but he'll figure something out. Claw his way through the steel if he has to.

The coffee he had when he thought he was going to survive this boils like lava in his stomach, sours him from the inside out. He's probably going to be sick later—no, right now. Maybe he'll spend the errant hour before he needs to board his own plane throwing up in a bathroom. It will take his mind off things, at least.

He heads back to the place where Ilya kissed him. The little outdoor smoking section at the end of the terminal, still mercifully deserted, mercifully exposed to the shitty winter sky—thank god it's a nasty day in Paris without Ilya—and stinks of cigarette smoke, and it is so comforting that Shane briefly cracks out of his misery and laughs at himself. Fucking feeling better because it reeks like cigarettes. Ilya really has ruined him.

He wants to pull his phone out and text Ilya about it, swallow down the little adrenaline hit of Ilya's chirp back, but the thought just pulls him back under the tide, because that's all they have again now. Just words on a screen, faces on video. They haven't texted in days, here; they haven't had to. Anything they needed to say could be breathed out along each other's skin, kissed into each other's mouths. Shane wipes at his nose with his sleeve, pulls at the corner of his eye, like he's training a dog on a leash to stay put: stop fucking crying.

He can't. He can't. He doesn't know what to do with this, how to take this weight and bring it home with him. How will they even get off the ground? Half of his heart is locked up on a plane, and it's not going where he's going. How is he supposed to live with that? He's alone, with all of this miserable love, and nowhere for it to pour into, and it's drowning him. Alone, because no one knows but him and Ilya, because this has to be a secret, only now he doesn't know if he can even walk back into the terminal and get on his flight shuddering under the weight of it alone.

He can barely see his phone screen under his shaking hands, through the unfocused wash of his eyes. He lets it ring in his palm, unsure until the moment the call connects and he hears his mom's faraway voice whether or not he is really going to put it to his ear.

But he does.

“Mom?”

“Shane? Is everything okay?”

His kneejerk reaction, even now, is to say *Yeah, everything is fine*, the words so well-worn and easy to reach for after years and years of lying to her, in big and little ways. He'd called her, the night Rose Landry had gently stripped him open and revealed she knew the worst kept secret of his life, ready to say something then, but she hadn't pushed past *Yeah, I'm fine, Mom*, and they had ended up talking about Montreal's fucking AHL callups instead.

He doesn't remember if he ever told her the opposite: no, everything is not fine. There were plenty of times that things were not fine before now. Plenty of fights in Juniors, plenty of times someone made slits of their eyes with their fingers pulled to their ears and said his dad had yellow fever and called him a cocksucker and a faggot. Plenty of times he came home in barely concealed tears and tore off to his room to cry alone in peace. He doesn't remember ever telling her he wasn't totally, absolutely fine.

The lies started early, the things he kept from her to protect her and himself. He was afraid, the same default state his whole life, what else is new. He was afraid then that if he told her just how bad it was sometimes, the other boys and the other parents, she would pull him out of hockey. He's still afraid of the same thing, even though she doesn't have that power over his life anymore. Even though he doesn't think she ever really would have kept him from hockey, for her own sake as much as his. But it was easier if things were fine, if he was all right. *I'm fine* has just become so much easier to say, keeping the wheels greased, keeping this train hurtling forward on its tracks. He doesn't know how to say anything else. But he thinks he ought to really fucking try, right now. He needs someone else to take this weight off of him, even a little.

"Mom, you're going to be so mad at me," he chokes out, the tears coming back, hot and fast and mortifying.

"Shane, what's wrong, honey? Are you at the airport?"

"Yes. Yeah, I am. Ilya just got on his flight and... fuck..."

Shane runs his wet sleeve hastily over his face, the fabric chafing his hot cheeks like he's dragging it along a sunburn. He stops and takes a breath, another, each one coming in thinner than the one before. His mom speaks softly into the wake of his last shuddering exhale.

"What's going on? Can you tell me, so I know how to help?"

He starts to speak, stumbling over the words. They spill out of him in a flood that he can't stop, once he starts.

"I'm in love with him. I love him so much, and he just got on a plane to Boston, and. And I wish I was going to Boston with him. I don't want to go back to Montreal. I don't want to go back, Mom. I don't want to go back, oh *fuck*—"

"Honey, honey, oh Shane, breathe," Mom whispers on the phone. "It's okay, sweetie."

"I'm so sorry, Mom," Shane says now, the stopper out, everything flooding out behind it. "I'm sorry I never told you or Dad. I'm so sorry."

His mom takes a half breath in, like this is the part that's truly shocked her.

"Honey, you don't have to apologize for anything. Okay? You're okay."

But Shane doesn't know what else to say other than *I'm sorry*, so he just sniffs around the dregs of his misery and goes quiet.

His mom says very gently, "This... sounds like it's been going on longer than Paris."

Shane chokes out a laugh around the lump clogging his throat. "Yeah... yeah. Since, um. Since our rookie season."

"Oh Shane. Oh wow."

"Mom, I don't know what to do. I just, I just..."

"Okay, honey, breathe," Mom says, again, and if she was here she'd probably be holding his hands in her hands and making him match her even breathing, like he's six years old again and melting down. "It'll be okay. He loves you too?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's the important part. Everything else is just details, right?"

Shane nods, where no one can see, just the grey sky and the cigarette butts stuffing up the receptacles lined up around him. Just details. Okay. Okay.

"He wants to move to Canada for me," he says.

"Oh my god, Shane," Mom says. "Well... whatever you two need, you know we're here for you, right?"

"Okay. Okay, Mom, thanks."

He hangs up with her after promising he'll text when the flight takes off. He stalks back inside, wanders around a concession stand for ten minutes or so, comes out with a couple of bottles of Evian and a sports magazine he probably won't read. He stuffs them all into his backpack and makes his way to his gate, crowded now with people. He fishes out his headphones and puts on something ambient and wordless and watches the clock.

Ilya texts him twenty minutes before boarding begins.

[Lily]

wifi on plane, will be able to text)))

no vodka even in first class

very shitty airline

Shane stares at the words, hearing them in Ilya's voice. When is the next time he's going to hear his voice? It doesn't sound the same in his head. It's not deep enough. It doesn't reverberate through his body and ring in his heart when it's just his memory. There are some things he can't replicate, no matter how much practice he's gotten.

He waits, Ilya's texts open on his screen, wondering if he will say anything else. A minute later, the little bubble pops up, like Ilya knows he's waiting with his screen an inch from his face and his knuckles going white from clutching his phone so hard.

[Lily]

I love you Shanya. we will be ok

have a nice flight text if you can

Shane starts to type out a message, chewing so hard on his bottom lip that he is afraid it's going to split.

I can't do this. I need you, Ilya. I feel like I'm dying.

Fuck. Shane deletes the entire thing, turns his phone over and over in his hands, until they start to call for first-class boarding and he realizes he's left Ilya on read for twenty minutes.

[Jane]

I love you so much. I'll text you on the plane.

Shane feels like a prisoner, like he's on death row, and the jet bridge walk is actually him heading to his execution. He wants to be curled up with Ilya on the cream-colored couch, watching garbage on television and talking about the cocktails they would serve at their wedding reception. He wants to be writhing under Ilya's mouth in the wrinkled bedsheets and feeling the squeeze of Ilya's hands into the small of his back. He wants to be standing with his head on Ilya's shoulder, watching the Eiffel Tower's lights glow in Ilya's eyes. He wants to have all of Paris packed up with him, all of their apartment, every touch and every kiss and every *I love you*, in order to rebuild it back in his big, empty, lonely Montreal condo, piece by piece, until he stops feeling scooped-out, hollow down to his bones, all the most important parts of him left behind or hurtling through the sky en route to Boston.

He takes an Evian from the flight attendant once he is in his seat, holds it like a talisman that might protect him from the clenching pain in his chest when the plane takes off and Paris is gone, so fast, blanketed instantly by clouds. Little hostile threads of rain pepper the window and he stares out at nothing and wishes he could have seen Paris overhead one more time. He thinks, if he looked hard enough, he would be able to pick out their apartment from all the other identical buildings below. Something would have made it immediately obvious: that one. That's ours.

He tries to sleep on the plane, the little curtain drawn, headphones on and cocooned in his hoodie, but he's not very surprised that it doesn't work. Sleep has always been the first thing that fails him in his hour of need.

What he does instead is think.

He thinks about Ilya, of course, there is nothing else to think about but Ilya. Ilya, disappearing out of sight down the jet bridge. Ilya, golden in the grey morning light, looking at him like his heart is breaking, too. Ilya, saying *I would go anywhere for you*. Neither of them know where *anywhere* is, but Ilya had said *we'll figure it out*.

Well, Shane can't fucking sleep anyway, he might as well try to figure it out.

There are three Canadian teams in the division. Montreal, a non-starter. No cap space, plenty of offensive depth to begin with, even in a world where the rivalry might not loom so large. Then, Toronto, that too has their own controversial star center, and Ilya would probably shoot himself in the leg and go on long-term injury reserve before he played on the second line for Dallas Fucking Kent.

And then there's Ottawa. The Ottawa Centaurs, terrible name for a terrible team.

On the one hand, they are totally beneath Ilya's talent and abilities. The coach sucks, close to retirement with nothing to show for it but pervasive disappointment, phoning it in before he hangs his clipboard up and fades into trivia-night obscurity. Shane would say they lack depth on the bench, but that would imply they have a functioning first line at all. When Shane faces off against their center, he can see his knees shake and the lost look in his eyes.

On the other hand, they have plenty of superstar money to throw at a generational talent looking to make a move. Ilya unexpectedly leaving Boston is going to be headline news, no matter what, but the story will sell better if he can point to a record-breaking salary and not, say, his secret Canadian boyfriend.

On the one hand, they haven't seen a playoff in about six hundred years. Shane's mom was in high school the last time they won a Stanley Cup. The seats are never more than half-full when they play at Canadian Tire Centre, and probably half of those are Montreal fans to boot.

On the other hand, Boston was in pretty bad shape before they built their first line and entire offensive strategy around an eighteen year old phenom from Russia, and they had a Cup in five years.

On the one hand, they are more or less the joke of the division, the joke of the conference, the joke of the entire MLH. The kind of generational stink that compounds on itself, engenders the locker room with a sort of fatalistic gloom. They never win. Like, really *never*.

On the other hand, they are two hours away from Montreal.

Shane sees drives taken after practice, loading his trunk with an overnight bag and heading out right from the rink, and being in Ilya's arms by dinner. Meeting at a hotel halfway, one hour apiece, one more hour spent together, Ilya racing him there in one of his insane sports cars and laughing when Shane accuses him of being a one-man road hazard. Ilya calling him from dinner with Shane's parents, recounting triumphant Friday poker nights and watching Shane's away games on the living room television while his mom makes everyone tea. Shane could see him every week that they are both at home, plus all the times their teams will play each other, plus summers, plus Christmas breaks, and on and on, until they are sitting one day

together on Shane's couch and they are laughing and saying, *Remember how long we used to go without seeing each other? How did we ever manage that?*

Fuck. Shane wants that. Wants that so badly it feels like there must be some catch, like it can't all really come together so easily this way. But it feels, instead, like the spark of strategic insight he gets watching hours of game tape, when he starts to feel ideas coalescing into plans, into movement. Maybe this plan sucks, and it's just desperation or hysteria fueling him, compelling him to incline his seat and pull his phone off the charger. Maybe Ilya will laugh in his face for even suggesting it.

But Shane doesn't think that will happen. He thinks that maybe, in the absence of Paris, in the absence of perfect, it is something to hold on to.

He types the entire thing out in his notes, reads it over, decides he sounds insane, or worse, exactly like his mom when she sends him ten-paragraph brand strategies at five in the morning. Ilya is going to take one look at the wall of text and ask him to please chill the fuck out. So, instead, Shane opens up their messages, and begins:

[Jane]

What if you played for Ottawa?

He watches the little dots appear, Ilya typing away. Shane bites down on his bottom lip, heart beating to the same cadence as the typing indicator, and waits. There, in the cabin's artificial darkness, it might be the first time today that Shane feels tethered to something.

Chapter End Notes

Shane's beautiful mind is always creating the Ottawa plan. Good first draft, proud of you, kiddo!

Two more chapters left, I can't believe it ;_; Really it is one chapter that got really huge and had to be split, though. I think I tweaked it to where the pacing still works as 2 chapters, but I guess y'all will be the judge of that. Really, I'm just proud of myself for writing *too* much becoming a problem for me for the first time in my billion years of writing fanfiction. The Heated Rivalry psychosis is so real 😞

And again, here I am, poor little baby in my rags and my milky eyes rattling a cup on the street going "kudos, comments, please, I'm so hungry."

[I spend time on tumblr](#) reblogging HR shit so come see all my objectively correct opinions on 6 hours of TV that is the only thing I think about anymore!

Chapter 13: Tell me, does your heart sometimes fly away?

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane acclimate to life back home.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Title is from Baudelaire's poem, [Grieving and Wandering](#).

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

A week after Ilya arrives back home, he looks up the meaning of a term he saw online: *Paris Syndrome*. He is surprised by the definition: a sense of alienation or depression caused by the discrepancy between your expectations of a place and its reality. Apparently, this happens to tourists who come to Paris often enough that it gets its own name.

Ilya wonders what the term is for the opposite sickness. When Paris has actually fulfilled all of your wildest dreams, and the real world now fills you with a deep longing for the other place, a bitter melancholy caused by reality. What's the name for *that*?

Lack-of-Paris Syndrome. Not-Paris Syndrome. That is what Ilya is suffering from. That is what Ilya has been plagued by, ever since he came home.

He lays in his enormous bed and he thinks: the sheets are the wrong color. The door to the ensuite is supposed to be on the other side of the room. When he looks out his window, he keeps expecting to see the slick tile floor of the wrap-around terrace. The sky looks far too blue, without the Eiffel Tower's incursion to temper it.

He wanders into his kitchen in the morning and feels disoriented. The layout is wrong. He always liked his kitchen, renovated it to his exact specifications when he bought this place, but now it feels too big. All that space, and just him standing in it, alone.

He spends a week waking up at four in the morning, as alert as if it was noon. It's the jet lag, of course, it's just as bad when he comes home from Russia in the summers. It evens out, or he tells himself it does, when he starts waking up at five, instead. The weight on the mattress feels off, with only him on it. Without Shane's even breathing on his chest, everything is too fucking quiet. He ends up staring at the ceiling until it's a decent hour to text Shane, too listless to do anything more.

His hockey has apparently gone to shit in the interim, and Ilya finds it hard to care. He's sluggish, distracted, although he feels like the only one who notices, because his mediocre is anyone else's best. They win their first game after he's back and everyone dogpiles him on the ice, screams *Fuck yeah, Roz!* in his ear, and Ilya feels like he's underwater, feels like he's watching someone else's celly on TV. He lets the boys take him out to celebrate, and lasts forty-five minutes before Shane starts texting him— *Connors was set up for you in the third period, you didn't see he was open?*— and Ilya steps outside the bar to listen to Shane's hot takes on his shitty playing and begs off of a second round of drinks to go home and FaceTime Shane with his dick out instead.

He calls Shane when he's in the store, looking at shoes. He calls Shane when he's out on his morning run, when he's in the gym. He calls Shane from the shower and Shane says, *You're going to ruin your headphones*, and Ilya says, *They are waterproof*, which he actually doesn't know for a fact, but they survive the experiment anyway.

Shane calls him before lunch with his parents and after lunch with his parents and in the car before practice and in the car after practice. Shane calls him before meeting with his nutritionist and his physiotherapist and some guy he goes to who makes him just do a bunch of weird deep breathing exercises. It helps, a little, filling up all the time they possibly can with each other this way. A little like that English phrase Ilya finds charmingly odd, *the hair of the dog that bit you*. Little shots of Shane Hollander to get him through this hangover, this long bout of Lack-of-Paris Syndrome.

"My mom says thank you for the bag," Shane says during one such call. He's in the middle of a gym session, panting on his stationary bike, the phone propped up at the perfect angle to see down the gaping front of his shirt when he's bent over like this. Ilya hears about half of the sentence. "She said it's, uh, kind of an expensive one."

Ilya wonders sometimes whether Shane knows the watch on his wrist costs eighty thousand dollars. A four thousand dollar bag is not worth getting worked up over. "Does she like it? I was not sure which color, there were so many options."

"She loves it. And, um, she wants your phone number. Is that okay? To say thanks, and also, I don't know. She's probably got a lot of opinions on the Ottawa thing."

One of the first things Shane had told Ilya after he stepped off the plane at Boston Logan was *I told my parents about us*. Ilya had already been dizzy, nearly high off of the rush of receiving Shane's wildly in-depth proposal that had started with *What if you played for Ottawa?* and had ended with links to articles of previous examples in hockey history where a single strategic signing had turned around the fortunes of an otherwise doomed team, including an hour long documentary on Mario Lemieux that Ilya couldn't even watch on the plane's shitty Wi-Fi.

For the rest of the flight, he had marinated in the afterglow of that experience, of Shane Hollander's laser focus trained entirely on him and his half-baked plan of moving to Canada so they could be closer to one another. And then, back on solid ground and wheeling his suitcase morosely through the airport, Shane had followed it up with the admission that the first thing he'd done, apparently, when Ilya had boarded his plane was call his mom and tell

her *everything*. It had settled like hot coals in his heart, warmed his chest to burning. It had made him want to turn right around in the terminal and get on the next flight to Montreal.

And now Shane Hollander's mom wants a way to keep in contact with him. It's another tether between them, a snaking vine reaching all the way across the border and binding them together. Ilya would have been satisfied with Yuna Hollander merely tolerating him. He tries to tamp down the ache in his chest with it: *This is already more than you ever expected you would get*. The problem is he's gotten too greedy. The problem is, Shane still isn't *here*.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to," Shane is saying, while Ilya is staring down his shirt at his big, sweaty tits and rightfully distracted. "My mom can be a lot."

"Yuna Hollander loves me now," Ilya says quickly. "She should have my number. I will become her favorite son, I think."

Shane laughs, breathless from the workout, but it's enough like when he laughs breathlessly from sex that it has about the same effect on Ilya. He sinks back into his couch with a hand absently slipping into his shorts.

"You might be right. I think she's still pissed that I didn't tell them about Russia." Shane glances up and sees the movement of Ilya's shoulder, the grin on his face, and scowls. "Ilya, can you not jerk off while we're talking about my mom? Gross."

"Then let's stop talking about your mom," Ilya says, taking himself in hand, angling the phone down so Shane can get a better look at him. "Get off the bike and go get on the floor."

"I have to be out the door for that sports drink thing in thirty minutes," Shane says, even as he's staggering off the machine, slumping to the floor with his phone in hand, spreading his legs a little.

"Oh, this is meant to be a challenge for me? To make you come in thirty minutes?"

Shane shimmies his shorts down his thighs, where they stick to him with sweat. Ilya would pull them down with his teeth, if he was there. Bury his face in the humid cave of Shane's unwashed crotch. "You want to make it one?"

"I do not need thirty minutes. Make it five."

Shane is already touching himself, already moaning, eyes lidded where he's watching Ilya jerk his own dick on his screen. In the end, they both only need three.

If they were still in Paris, Shane would not need to hang up the phone while his breath is still thin and hot, his thighs still damp and delicious with the sheen of sweat. If they were in Paris, Ilya would spread his whole body out on top of Shane, feel him everywhere, carve out a path along Shane's slick neck with his tongue. If they were still in Paris, there would be no commitments keeping them apart from each other, and Shane would be right beside him, and Ilya wouldn't feel like something is tearing its way through him every time the screen goes black and his own sad face is left staring back at him.

So Yuna Hollander gets Ilya's phone number, texts him about the bag— she loves the yellow, which Ilya finds more of a relief than he expected. Texts her condolences about his father, which gives him a strange dizzying vertigo, to be the focus of maternal kindness for only the second time in his adult life, after that first unexpected FaceTime in Versailles. Texts her opinions, as Shane feared, about Ottawa.

Ilya swaps his navy blue bedsheets for white ones. It helps a little.

Word starts to get around about them. It starts with social media, a few bits of fan commentary. *Did Rozanov and Hollander hang out in Paris during the Volcano Lockout? Does anyone know?* Then, someone uploads a picture to Twitter. It isn't even the one Ilya remembers taking with the college girls in Versailles, but a picture of them walking around the Louvre together. Not particularly damning, or anything. Just the two of them side-by-side, staring up at a painting, unaware they were being photographed.

It's enough to create a round of articles, from the types of sports sites that get their content exclusively from trawling social media. One of the bigger hockey podcasts, *Mother Puckers*, spends half an episode talking about it. The name of the episode is *Rivalry Quashed?* Ilya has to look up the word *quashed*, just to make sure. *Quashed*, it turns out, is a good thing. It turns out, they've spent the last nine years quashing their rivalry in secret every time they are in the same city.

Marley asks him about it in the locker room.

"You hung out with Hollander in Paris, huh, Roz?"

"Yes."

"Hey, he meet your Paris girl?" Connors cuts in.

Connors always wants to talk exclusively about girls he's fucking, or girls his teammates are fucking. Leave it to him to find a way to bring the conversation right back around to the imaginary girl Ilya wheeled in Paris.

"There is no Paris girl," Ilya says truthfully.

"Yeah fucking right, dude."

And then it's forgotten, or the information is assimilated, at least among the Raiders. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov hung out in Paris, and now they are friends. The guys mostly want to know if Ilya learned any dirty French from his nonexistent girl that they can use on the puck bunnies in Montreal.

Honestly, Ilya wants to be asked a little more about Shane. The words are constantly stuck to the back of his teeth, details too fully incriminating to share with his teammates, and too cloying for Sveta to tolerate. *Shane complains about complex carbohydrates but he ate croissants for me. Shane's phone wallpaper is the statue in the Louvre that reminds him of me, the one that looks like the Rolls Royce hood ornament. Shane thinks that he loves me*

more than anyone has ever loved anyone else, but it's not true, because I love him even more than that.

He's full to bursting all the time, thinking about Shane, missing Shane, wanting Shane. He wants someone to ask something tiny, something innocuous, so he can spend a few minutes letting the name *Shane Hollander* escape safely past his lips. A release valve, a safety mechanism, so he doesn't die from the pressure welling inside of him.

He gets his chance in the media scrum soon enough. Someone from Barstool asks him, "So is there no more beef between you and Shane Hollander?"

At first Ilya doesn't understand. "Beef? What is beef?"

"Your rivalry. Since the two of you hung out in Paris recently."

"Ah, listen. There is no rivalry. I do not know who told you this. He is very good player. I am even better player," Ilya says, and winks, knows that they will wring some entertainment value out of it. "But yes, he is my friend, we had very good time in Paris together."

That almost feels like it's saying too much, but maybe only to him, who knows what a paper-thin veneer those words are over the truth: that he will never be as happy in his life as he was with Shane Hollander in Paris. The reporter, thankfully, does not catch on, just keeps going with his bullshit questions.

"How are the girls in Paris, Roz?"

Ilya just smiles.

Shane watches the interview, of course, and calls Ilya when they are both back in their hotel rooms after their games, and Ilya gets to watch him minorly freak out, as expected, gets to talk him down little by little until Shane is breathing mostly normally and is saying, "Okay, okay. It's good, yeah. It's good," more or less to himself.

"They did not ask you same thing tonight?"

"Uh, no, not yet. I guess I should expect it, huh?"

"Probably."

"And if they, like, ask me what you mean by a 'very good time in Paris', what should I say?"

"Well, it depends."

"Depends on what?"

"How much information you want to give. Everyone already knows about Louvre museum. So, if you do not want to tell reporters about how I fucked you raw for first time, just mention Louvre."

"Ilya, I'm being serious."

“I am also being serious.”

“So if a reporter asked you to elaborate, you would seriously say, ‘Oh, my favorite part was fucking Shane Hollander without a condom on’.”

“No.”

“Yeah, obviously not.”

“Because it was not my favorite part,” Ilya clarifies.

Shane rolls his eyes. “What was your favorite part?”

“I have video of my favorite part.” Ilya can’t help his smile from going a little sad, watching Shane’s eyes soften. Of course he didn’t forget that part, either. “I could just pull out my phone and show reporters my favorite part.”

“Please don’t do that,” Shane says, but his voice is low and tender.

They are two timezones and almost two-thousand miles apart. Ilya wants to kiss him so badly that it registers like nausea in his stomach. The desire to touch him hits him like withdrawal, like missing a necessary organ. He feels the lack of it in his chest, without Shane’s head there. On his fingertips, numbed without Shane’s warmth.

Fuck, why does he have to be in Washington, DC, and not Denver, Colorado with Shane? Why do they ever have to play any other teams, losers and non-contenders? Montreal and Boston should play eighty-two times a year and battle only each other for the Stanley Cup. Cut out the rest of the division, the other conferences, too. All Ilya wants is Shane in reach, always, always.

He wants to say, *Don’t get on your flight to Chicago tomorrow, and I won’t get on my flight back to Boston, and let’s put ourselves down as a healthy scratch for both our games and meet in the middle so I can say I love you into your mouth and not on a fucking video call.*

Instead he says, “I want to change your name in my phone.”

“What?”

“If we are friends, then it is not so strange to have your phone number saved. Actually, it is worse to have it saved under a fake name. People will maybe think this is suspicious.”

Ilya doesn’t actually know if this is true, but it feels like a good argument, though not at all the real reason. Ilya just wants to see Shane’s name when he checks his phone. Ilya just wants all he can get of Shane, while he can truly have so little of him, so much less than he needs. If he has to keep saying *I love you* to *Jane* instead, he isn’t sure he will survive.

Shane looks nervous again, just when he seemed to be calming down. Ilya’s fault.

“What if someone looks over at your phone and you’re sexting me?” Shane says.

“Woah, maybe it is *you* sexting *me*.”

“Okay, fine, what if someone catches us sexting and they see *Shane*?”

It’s not a bad point. On the other hand, their sexting has long since lost its veneer of plausible deniability. Ilya has been texting him shit like *Do you miss my mouth on your cock*, and getting back *Wishing it was your hand on my dick instead*, for years at this point. If someone looks at their messages for longer than a few seconds, they will instantly know these are two men talking about fucking each other.

“I guess they will know rivalry really is *quashed*, in that case.”

“You’re an asshole,” Shane says, so soft that it clenches like a vise around Ilya’s heart.

“We delete everything anyway, so.”

Which is heartbreaking, if Ilya thinks about it too long. So many years of their lives, of them in each other’s, gone, vanished from history. There are entire seasons where Ilya missed and wanted and dreamed of Shane that are a big blank spot in his phone, all of the evidence, good and bad, dutifully destroyed in the name of self-preservation. Before Paris, this was maybe painful but not lethal. After, it feels like a mortal wound. He wants so much of Shane, and he still has so little of him left behind when he is gone.

And Shane is maybe thinking the same thing, because he says, “I don’t want to delete ‘I love you’, though,” and it sounds like it hurts him, too, just as much.

“Then don’t,” Ilya says. Maybe he won’t either. Maybe some things are worth taking irresponsible risks for.

Later, he sends Shane a screenshot of his name rightfully at the top of their text thread. Ten minutes later, Shane sends one back.

It helps a little. Everything helps, but just a little.

Ilya tries, he really does. He stays on the phone with Shane until he’s tired enough to sleep, even alone in his bed. He circles every *MTL - BOS* game on the team calendar, and every feasible break in between where one of them could hop a flight to see the other. He checks whether the Airbnb is booked up already for July or not, though that feels almost like it does more harm than good. He looks ahead, to Ottawa, to summer 2018, and pointedly does not think about how many away games they will both have to play every season, how there will still be weeks they can’t see each other, how he will still have Shane in his bed sometimes but not all of the time, not enough, never enough.

Lack-of-Paris Syndrome, he discovers, is a long, lingering malaise. It comes and goes in waves. It’s chronic, rattling in his rib cage like the enduring cough left behind by a terrible flu. When the symptoms are at their nadir, he smiles on the ice, he feels the blood rush through him when he scores a goal, he can laugh with Shane on the phone and make him come and still fall asleep after without feeling hollowed-out, empty, painfully raw.

When the symptoms are their worst, he doesn't think he can go this long with his heart living outside of his body, that somehow it got packed up in Shane's suitcase and now resides in his Montreal condo, and surely no one is meant to survive that.

The nights are, somehow, the worst, not that Ilya is particularly trying to rank all the times he feels terrible. He wouldn't think they would be. If this was one of their games, his and Shane's, *Guess which time of the day it hurts me the most that you aren't here with me, the winner gets to lock the loser up in their home and wring one hundred thousand kisses out of them and never let them leave again*, he would have guessed the morning. That was his favorite time of the day in Paris, probably, Shane's hair adorably smushed from sleeping against Ilya's chest and his mouth sticky and in need of a toothbrush, and fucking into his warm, inviting body before either of them were fully awake, like Ilya had rolled right out of a favorite dream into unbelievable reality. But, it turns out, nighttime is when his body fights him the most, when the wanting seeps out of his bones and lights up his nervous system. Too late at night to call Shane to talk him down from it, when Ilya can close his eyes and pretend he's right here.

Some addictions can be lethal in the withdrawal, Ilya knows. It's the physical dependence that will kill you. Needing Shane so badly beside him that he can't fucking sleep, and none of the little remedies help: the white sheets and Shane's name in his phone and the thought of maybe seeing him a fraction more often in *two years, two years you have to survive this, two years and sometimes you'll spend the night but mostly you still won't, mostly you will still be all alone, and you will have to live off only that until you are both retired, if you can, if you think you might someday get used to it enough to sleep through the night again*.

Ilya gets out of bed, on one of these nights. It's two or three in the morning, but he's giving up on sleep, will just power through the next twenty-four hours and crash hard later. He stalks into his living room and sprawls out on his couch, which is the wrong color and the wrong fabric and which Shane never looked nervous about getting dirty. His TV gets all the right channels and there are no subtitled reruns of *Hawaii 5-0* to watch in desperation. Ilya catalogs all of this, and then gets his laptop out and perches it on his lap, its glow the only thing leaving him not entirely wrapped in shadow.

He is still there in the morning, light starting to filter in from the big living room windows, when he finally closes his computer and goes to make himself a cup of coffee strong enough to get through morning practice. He has a list of stores in his email now, to visit during his open afternoon. Upscale, the sort of places where the entire process is carried out on-site, not that he has elaborate requirements. Just something gold, something engraved.

It's not a cure, he thinks, of course it's not. Not-Paris Syndrome can't be cured so easily.

But he needs something. He needs a little bit more than what he has, if he's going to make it.

"Hey bud, you all right?"

For a moment, Shane is pissed off.irate, actually, immediately and irrationally so. Hayden has paused in the middle of working off his skates, half of his gear tossed off and the other half still strapped to his body, and is looking at Shane with the kind of scrutinizing concern his mom gets that makes his neck go prickly and his face hot. It's the kind of expression that makes him lie, reflexively.

"I'm fine," he says.

He is obviously, *obviously* not fine, but Hayden should have no way of knowing that. Shane's been playing well, since he got back from Paris. They won their first three games and only lost the fourth because Collier and Redland caught penalties at the same fucking time and they couldn't overcome the deficit Edmonton's five-on-three power play put up. Not Shane's fault. He's been giving the same speeches before games and after games, the same interviews. He has done everything Theriault asked him to do since reentering the MLH's orbit and hasn't complained once.

There's no way for Hayden to know that Shane can't fucking sleep. That nothing about the quiet of his apartment feels like it used to, calming, centering. That it used to feel like an oasis after all the shouting, the riotous crowds, the mics shoved in his face and the reporters all talking over each other, but now it feels like a tomb. The wrong kind of quiet, like something has died. Hayden wouldn't know that Shane is used to sleeping with his ear against Ilya's chest, over his heart, and that now he misses its steady beating so badly that he wants to die from it.

So like, he can't sleep. But he's still showing up. He's still playing hockey. They're still winning. So for all Hayden knows, Shane is fine.

Hayden looks at him like he's not buying it, but he's quiet for a while, long enough that Shane thinks maybe he's going to drop it. He shrugs out of the rest of his gear and tosses it in the bins, reaches up for his phone. Ilya hasn't texted him yet. Maybe he's waiting for Shane to call him on his way home. He can feel Hayden's eyes like static electricity on the back of his neck.

"Hey, if you want to talk about anything, man, you know I'm here," Hayden says.

Shane almost wants to ask him what it is he's seeing. What does the feeling of missing someone so acutely that it might prove fatal look like on the outside? Because Shane is doing all the right things and saying all the right things, and the only one who is supposed to know how fucking bad Shane feels is Ilya, who feels the same way. But somehow, Hayden's noticed too, which means Shane is not doing a good enough job at pretending to be *fine*.

He isn't going to ask, of course. He does what he does best when anyone he loves asks him a question he can't answer without giving the entire game away. He just lies.

"Yeah, I know. Thanks. I'm fine, though." Shane nods along to his own words, like he is attempting to convince himself, too. "I'm just, uh, getting used to being back."

One of the things about Hayden that Shane appreciates is he doesn't push too hard. It's probably the reason they've managed to stay friends this long, with Shane harboring his

giant, terrifying *I'm gay* secret and now, more urgently, his *I am in love with Ilya Rozanov* secret. Every once in a while, Hayden stumbles into a line of questioning that gets a little too close to these closely guarded truths, but he's never dogged enough to send Shane into a full panic, or to figure him out. If Shane doesn't want to talk about it, Hayden drops it. He's a good fucking friend, honestly.

So now, Hayden says, "Okay, yeah," and continues working open the laces of his skates, and changes the subject mercifully away from how much of an obvious wreck Shane is. "Wanna come over for dinner sometime this week? Jackie wants to hear about Paris. She wants to do a trip without the kids next year, somewhere nice. She wanted to go this summer but then she got pregnant again, so."

"Oh, uh, sure," Shane says, because he can't think of a good excuse in the moment to say no. "Yeah, I haven't seen Jackie and the kids in a while. That would be cool."

The dread of dinner at Hayden and Jackie's house follows him all the way to his car, which makes Shane feel terrible, compounds the guilt and the panic into a sick lump in his stomach. It's just, he can keep his mind off things for only so long, long enough to get through a practice, a game, a media scrum that doesn't ask him too many questions about Ilya. He can melt into part of the Metros machine and speak in the royal we and forget about his individual misery until he is home, and then, ideally, Ilya is purring in his ear on the phone and he can forget about it even longer.

It's when he has to be himself, lately, that it's the hardest to pretend. Shane just isn't sure he can do it long enough to survive a two-hour dinner at Hayden's house, with Jackie asking him, *So, what should we do in Paris?* When Shane's only answer could be, *Well, I spent most of the time only looking at Ilya Rozanov, so I don't really know what to tell you. Maybe try crying in front of Notre Dame?*

He has really only seen his parents since he's been back, which is great, because he can at least be authentically sad with them, now that they know everything. He has the almost unimaginable luxury of saying, *I miss Ilya*, and having Mom just understand. He can talk about Paris the way it really was, Ilya at the center of every story.

It gets him in trouble once. Shane lets it slip that *Oh, Ilya taught me this really fun Russian card game on the train. Maybe you'd like it, Mom.* And his mom, naturally, asks, *Oh, where did you go, honey?* And Shane only then remembers he never told them he went to fucking Russia. So that had been a fun time, explaining all of that. Still, it seems infinitely preferable to field his mom's skeptical questions about how Ilya's friend could get him a visa with only a few hours' notice than to have to pretend that none of it happened at all, that it isn't still happening, actively: wishing he was still there, missing Ilya like some vital part of him has been ripped out.

"Do not go to Pike's house if you do not want to go," Ilya says later, when Shane calls him on the way home from the arena.

"It's not that I don't want to go," Shane says. "Or, I don't know, I should want to go, because they're my friends. But what do I even say? They're going to ask about Paris. They're going to want to know everything."

“So tell them everything,” Ilya says, his tone hard to read through Shane’s CarPlay, flattened out by road noise.

“It’s just hard. I don’t know how to talk about it if I’m not mentioning you. Like, everyone knows about the Louvre, now, but we were together everywhere.”

“So you mention me, too.”

Shane blows out his breath, wonders if Ilya is being obtuse on purpose. “Yeah, because you’re always telling me what a great poker face I have, asshole. I’m barely keeping it together in the interviews when they ask me how we managed to become friends.”

Ilya sighs. When he speaks again, his voice is quieter, softer. “You don’t have to use poker face, Shane. You can just tell them. It is okay with me.”

Shane’s mouth goes dry. “Oh. Um.”

“If you want to. Would Hayden have a problem with it?”

Shane doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what he’s built up in his head, the worst case scenarios, Hayden snarling at him in immediate, visceral disgust, and what he can reasonably expect. Probably a *What the fuck?* due to the Ilya Rozanov of it all.

“Probably not. I don’t know why I’m freaking out about it.”

Hayden is safe. Probably safe. But it still feels like stepping off the edge of a cliff, to say it out loud. To say it in person, sitting across the table, and to have to either look into his friends’ shocked faces or to stare down at his plate of food and absorb their reactions from two feet away. At least his mom had been on the phone when Shane told her. By the time he saw her in person again, she had had some time to process it.

Maybe that is a better idea. First, tell someone safe and mercifully removed from Shane’s day to day life. Get used to saying the words without them being forced from his chest with heaving, panicked breaths.

This thought builds and builds until Shane feels compelled to tell Ilya about it, a few days later, peering at him through his phone’s perch at the head of his bed, propped upright between pillows.

“Can I tell Rose?” Shane asks.

Ilya stares at him. His hand, which is already tugging at his dick under his shorts, stills immediately. Shane, himself, is not sure why he picked right now to say it. He’s on hands and knees over his bedsheets, and naked, and about to put on a show for Ilya in his Tampa hotel room. He has the dildo out and everything, and his weird fucking brain decides right then to start this discussion up again. And now Ilya is looking at him a little angry and equally confused at Shane’s choice of timing.

“You still talk to Rose Landry?” Ilya says flatly.

Oh. That isn't exactly what Shane thought Ilya would be concerned about. He half expected Ilya to ignore the question entirely— *That pretty mouth is too empty if it has time to ask stupid questions*— but now Ilya looks pissed off. Which is, like, entirely hypocritical. As if Ilya has any leg to stand on at all. If Shane has to be okay with Ilya's totally blurred lines of friends and fuckbuddies, then Ilya has to, as well.

"Yeah, I do," Shane says, narrowly. "She's my friend."

Ilya pulls his hand out of his shorts so he can cross his arms in a huff. It pushes the muscles of his chest up further into Shane's line of sight. "You have other friends."

"Ilya..."

"What."

"You want Svetlana as your best man in the wedding!" Shane says, sitting back on his ankles, not really wanting to fuck himself for Ilya's viewing pleasure at the moment.

"This is different," Ilya says, mouth pouting sourly, lower lip puffed out.

"No it's not! Oh my god, Ilya."

"She is my nemesis," Ilya says, matter of factly. "First person you tell will be my nemesis."

"The first person I told was my *mom*, actually," Shane says. "And *nemesis*?" He laughs, can't help himself. Ilya is just fucking charming, even when he's being stupid. *Nemesis*. Like he's Captain Ahab. Shane loves him so much, even more when he's childish and jealous and, frankly, a little insane. Shane gestures at the dildo, looming helpfully in the direct line of sight of the camera, in emphasis. "Ilya. I'm *gay*. I'm so gay that Rose figured it out first."

Ilya's scowl softens a little. "Did she."

"She wanted to set me up with her co-star, who's a guy."

This is apparently the wrong thing to say, because Ilya is immediately angry again. "This is why she is my nemesis, Shane!"

"So that's a no, then? You're telling me I can't tell Rose that I'm in love with you? Even though you should want her to know that I'm, like, off the table forever. Even though I already was, being *gay*."

Ilya sighs. He uncrosses his arms.

"No, I am not telling you that," he says finally, the sharpness drained from his voice. "You can tell whoever you want to tell."

"Okay."

It's the second time Ilya has said that to Shane. *You can tell whoever you want. You can tell them everything*. He never puts any caveats on the words, never hedges them. Maybe because

Ilya knows Shane is even more cautious than he is. Or maybe he just trusts Shane so much that he would let Shane share their secret with anyone he thinks is safe enough to know.

“You, uh, you can too, you know,” Shane says quietly. “I trust you.”

He isn’t expecting the wide smile that strikes across Ilya’s face. “Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, not Barstool Sports, obviously. Not Desjournays. No one that could, like, ruin our lives,” Shane says.

Ilya’s eyes flicker over him through the screen, as he pretends to think this through.

“I will hire skywriter airplane. Fly it over Back Bay. *Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander*.”

It is so stupid, sometimes, the things that hurt the most. Shane imagines this, the wispy words curving over Boston Harbor, and the pain comes back all at once, the wanting, the lack of Ilya here with him, in his bed, in his city. Shane’s chest floods with it, clenches around it in his throat. Shane bites down on his lip, hard, until he doesn’t feel the stinging at the corners of his eyes anymore.

“Please don’t do that,” he says.

Ilya’s eyes are so soft, baby blue wasted on his phone’s shitty camera, blurred into shadow. Shane would do anything, anything right now, if he could just touch him. If he could reach through the screen and two-thousand kilometers and feel Ilya’s curls between his fingers and his warm breath against his mouth. In the intervening weeks since they came home, he’s wished for all sorts of natural disasters, blizzards and hurricanes and the sudden appearance of new angry volcanoes sprouting up on North American soil, provided they happen at the exact time that Shane is in Boston or Ilya is in Montreal. Shane would do anything. He just wants to see Ilya’s eyes like that in person. And that, maybe, would be enough for now.

Slowly, Ilya drops his hand back down to his lap, starts palming himself over his shorts. “I am ready to be done arguing about this now.”

Shane watches him touch himself, pitches himself back up onto his hands and knees. “I didn’t know we were arguing.”

“No, because we are done,” Ilya says, and nods with his chin. “Put dildo in your ass now, please.”

Shane tells Rose the next day. Rose is easy to tell: she already knows Shane is gay and she is charmingly vulgar enough to ask him right away if he got any good dick in Paris. All he has to do is say yeah, he did, and she steers the rest of the conversation right into Shane’s confession, that the good dick in question belongs to Ilya Rozanov, along with Shane’s entire heart.

She is shocked and maybe a little too ecstatic, can’t stop saying how hot Ilya is and wanting to know way too much about the size of his dick and how his accent sounds in bed than Shane is comfortable telling anybody, let alone one of the only other people on earth who has

seen Shane's dick herself. But she's happy for him, truly happy, and Shane ends up telling her everything, the whole unbelievable timeline, the Ottawa plan, all of it.

"He must *really* love you, to play for fucking Ottawa," Rose laughs.

Shane is shocked how much lighter he feels after the call, how unburdened. Near euphoric from the disclosure, which is maybe why he gets in the shower after and ends up crying there, fat, hysterical tears rolling down his face which he can't stop and barely even understands. He is so happy that someone else knows and he is so fucking sad all of the time and it hurts, it's wonderful and it's terrible in equal measure. And it's temporary, right? So it should be easier than this. Just the rest of this season, and then one more, and then.

And then. And then, still. Different schedules, weeks on the road, weeks where there still won't even be two hours they can spare for each other. Different cities, different houses, different beds. Still praying for another well-timed volcano.

But hey, at least Shane can be sad on the phone with Rose now, too.

He does not cancel on Jackie and Hayden, even though Shane thinks about doing it every single day, right up until he's standing at their door with the bottle of wine none of them will drink. Jackie takes it from him with one hand on her conspicuously pregnant belly and Shane feels like a stupid fucking asshole.

Jackie makes them a frankly awesome salmon thing for dinner. It has some kind of creamy sauce that she swears has no dairy or alcohol in it, but tastes decadent and rich and immediately reminds Shane of the food on the train to Moscow, and Ilya's hands on him, and Ilya's deep voice soft behind his ear, telling Shane about his mother. Maybe everything will be like this forever, every sense memory bringing him back to Ilya in one way or another, and Shane is just going to have to find a way to live through it.

His usual trick is to talk to Ilya about it, to always be talking to Ilya, so he snaps a photo of his plate to send to him later. Has a five minute spiral of thinking through a version of the evening where he sends it to him in front of Hayden and Jackie, and they ask who he's sending the photo to, and he says, *oh, to Ilya*, and they ask why, and he says, *because he's my boyfriend*, and then they stare at him in shocked silence and he can't figure out what happens after that, and so he decides to just not think about it, not think about it at all. He'll send the photo to Ilya later.

"It's really good," he says, hopefully sounding like he means it. Hopefully not sounding hollowed out to the bone.

Shane likes Hayden because he never pries too deeply. Jackie does, though. She loves drama, loves to tell him about the WAG fights and who said what in the group chat. She wanted to know every detail of Shane's short experience as Rose Landry's boyfriend. Jackie's saving grace is she loves to talk, so Shane can usually set her up for a story and then retreat back into it, and it will be twenty minutes before anyone asks him another question he has to navigate. Shane thinks maybe dinner tonight will go more or less the same way. Maybe Jackie just wants to ask about Paris as a pretext for telling Shane how much she wants to go on *any* vacation where she isn't pregnant and debilitated with morning sickness for once.

“I really wanted to go to Paris when we got married, but I was pregnant with the twins, and they don’t even let you fly once you start looking huge.”

“Oh,” Shane says, lightly grossed out as ever from hearing about pregnancy, always unavoidable at the Pike residence, it seems. “That sucks.”

“But I’m so done after this one,” Jackie says. “We’re so freaking going to Paris next year, babe.”

When they are together, Hayden serves mostly as Jackie’s conversational hype man, peppering color commentary over Jackie’s topics of choice. “Jackie was so disappointed that we couldn’t see the Eiffel Tower from our hotel,” he says now.

“Oh, yeah, that hotel sucked,” Shane says, nodding solemnly, like hearing about the Eiffel Tower and immediately imagining their view from the apartment hasn’t just hit him between the ribs like a bullet, shot point-blank.

“Man, it blows you were stuck there a whole week,” Hayden says. “The shower in my room didn’t even work right.”

“No, uh, we got an Airbnb, actually, in the 16th, right by the Eiffel Tower. We could see it from the patio,” Shane says, and thinks of the lights, kaleidoscoping in Ilya’s eyes, and how the cigarette smoke curled around them both, mingling with their frozen breath. He is so distracted by the melancholy of this memory that he doesn’t even notice what he’s said until both of them are staring at him with puzzled frowns on their faces.

“Wait, who were you with?” Hayden says.

Shane has to casually take another bite of salmon and kale and thoughtfully chew it into mush while his entire body turns cold and panic flares hot on the back of his neck. Fuck, he thinks, why couldn’t he have just lied? He can still lie, now. He can make something up, invent a girl he meant when he said *we*, anything to get through dinner. This suddenly feels insurmountably harder than telling his mom or Rose. This feels like the worst idea he’s ever had. Shane swallows. Clears his throat.

“Rozanov,” he hears himself say.

“Dude, *what?*” Hayden says, at the same time that Jackie says, “*Ilya Rozanov?*”, shocked and delighted in the same sort of way that she gets when she is about to tell Shane some really juicy gossip from the group chat.

“Yeah. We, uh. We hung out while we were there.”

“Yeah, I know,” Hayden says flatly, and for the first time Shane wonders if maybe Hayden is pissed that Shane didn’t talk to him about it. “We saw the pictures on Twitter, or whatever, but I didn’t know you two *stayed* together. So you guys really are friends, now? I thought you hated his fucking guts, dude.”

“Hayden,” Jackie says, only she’s looking at Shane intently, eyes darting around his face, like she’s reading the inside of his mind. Shane is sure she’s figured something out. Or maybe he’s a paranoid, and she hasn’t noticed anything is out of the ordinary at all.

Hayden, for his part, just looks annoyed.

“What? Shane fucking hated the guy for years. Now, Rozanov’s talking to the cameras, saying you two are buddies. I thought he was just talking shit.”

“He’s not talking shit,” Shane says, staring at the wall behind Hayden. “We’re friends.”

Hayden just shakes his head. “You’re actually friends with Rozanov.”

“He’s really not that bad.”

“I mean,” Jackie says, laughing, “he’s kind of *that bad*. You know he slept with Ryan Cannelton’s girlfriend? Apparently as a bet that he could.”

Shane did not, in fact, know this. Ryan Cannelton is an asshole, though, who loves to call Shane a *cocksucking dickless bitch* whenever they play him and the rest of North Carolina’s best and brightest, so he doesn’t feel particularly bad for him. He’s guessing if he asks Ilya about this later, Ilya will give more or less the same justification. *He is piece of shit who needed to be knocked down a peg, Shane. Was basically community service.* There is also the fact that Ilya is not doing any more fucking of anyone else’s girlfriends, of course, but Hayden and Jackie don’t know anything about that. And won’t, unless Shane tells them, and by the way this conversation is going, that is looking like less and less of a good idea.

Hayden, naturally, jumps in to bolster his wife’s point. “He knocked out three of Collier’s front teeth last year, dude.”

Collier shouldn’t mouth off if he can’t handle himself in a fight, Shane thinks, but of course that’s not very *captainly* of him, so he just says nothing. Maybe they can be done talking about Paris now.

No such luck. “But it was just the two of you?” Jackie says, barrelling ahead. “Everyone else on the team came home, right? Just you two got stranded.”

“Yeah. It was, um. Just us two.”

“Pickle said Rozanov was shacking up with some chick in Paris,” Hayden says. Shane forgot, until now, that Hayden has a friend on the Raiders, a guy he knows from Juniors. Ritchie Pickering: Pickle, or Picks, or Pecker when the guys are being particularly obscene. Shane has heard about him before. He just didn’t know that they still, apparently, traded gossip with one another about their teammates like this. “Everyone said he stayed behind for this French girl. They were all pissed because he fucked up their top line to get his dick wet.”

“Oh my god, Shane, please don’t tell me you spent a week wheeling girls in Paris with Rozanov,” Jackie says. “I’ve been telling my single friends how *normal* you are this whole time!”

“I didn’t,” Shane says quickly, staring at his plate. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Wait, so was there a girl or not?” Hayden says, unusually prying. Gathering intel to take back to his buddy, maybe. Probably gleeful over the possibility that Ilya Rozanov might have lied to his team about why he ended up stuck in Paris, that the real reason might be something he didn’t want anyone to know.

Shane should probably shut up. Or just say yes, there was a girl, but Shane didn’t meet her, doesn’t care about that. Yes, they stayed together, but no, it wasn’t a big deal, he barely saw Ilya the whole time. Ilya was getting up to whatever Ilya Rozanov gets up to, and they are cool now, but that’s it. That’s it.

And then he will have to spend the rest of his life pretending to Hayden and Jackie that he isn’t in love with Ilya. That Ilya isn’t the first thing he thinks of when he wakes up in the morning and the last thing on his mind at night. That he has spent a single day since coming back to Montreal feeling like himself, feeling anything but torn in half, missing all of the vital parts of him, a zombie that hasn’t yet figured out it’s dead.

And he knows what will happen if he tries to do that. If he can’t tell them about Ilya, about what he means to Shane, then he’s pushing them out of his life. He can’t call someone his best friend when, really, they don’t know him at all. So he won’t. Little by little, he’ll retreat from them, wave Hayden off. *No, I’m fine, nothing’s wrong, sorry I can’t come over next week, it’s not a good time.* He’s already doing it. He dreaded coming tonight, nearly talked himself out of it a hundred times. So Shane, probably, has to decide if he is going to be honest, right now, or if he’s going to push Hayden and Jackie out of his life for good.

“...No. There, uh, was no girl,” he hears himself say. “That isn’t why he stayed behind.”

“I heard something happened with his dad,” Jackie says, “so maybe it was a family thing?”

“Yeah, but why not just tell everyone that?” Hayden says. “He’s such an ass. He’s just gotta be swinging his dick everywhere he goes, pretending to wheel some girl.”

“It was for me,” Shane says, sounding far away from himself, like he’s listening to an old interview playing on TV. “Rozanov stayed behind in Paris for me, actually.”

Shane glances up at his friends’ faces. Hayden is wearing the same confused expression he gets when he’s fucking up his drills, fumbling through a play he can’t commit to memory. Jackie, though, is smarter than maybe Shane gives her credit for, because she is looking at him so softly now, not so different from the way his mom looks at him when he says he misses Ilya. Maybe it’s a look that motherhood affords you, this warmth that can be deployed on people with strategic sharpness, a guided missile of sympathy. This way of picking someone apart, gently, with knowing, pointed compassion. He can practically see his mom’s words on Jackie’s lips, *Oh, honey.*

She knows, from something on his face, or maybe he just can’t say Ilya’s name anymore without some of the love bleeding out with it. Maybe it’s just all there, plain as day, for anyone who’s looking to see.

When his mom looks at him this way, he usually ends up saying more than he plans to. *I miss him, Mom. I miss him so much. I don't know how I'm going to make it two years like this.* And now, with Jackie looking like she wants to give him a big hug, like he's one of her kids with a hurt she can kiss and make better, Shane again ends up saying everything.

"We're together. We're, um. He's... my boyfriend."

Jackie puts her hands up to her face, covers the wide 'O' of her mouth with her manicured fingers. "Oh my god."

"What?" Hayden says. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah, what the fuck," Shane says, then puts his hands on the table in front of him and drops his head down heavily to rest there.

"Are you fucking with me, dude?"

"Babe..." Jackie says.

"Wait, you're gay?"

"Yeah," Shane says into his hands. His face feels like it's on fire. Any second now, he's going to start breathing too hard, and his vision will tilt, and he will have a nice, perfectly timed panic attack in his friend's dining room.

"Ilya Rozanov is gay, too?"

"No," Shane mumbles. "He likes both."

"Holy shit," Hayden says again. "What the *fuck*."

"Shane, honey," Jackie says, with a tone that implies that if Shane could lift his head out of his hands, he would see her staring daggers at her husband. "It's okay. Sorry, it's just, like, kind of a shock."

"It is a pretty big fucking shock, dude," Hayden says.

"Babe, chill, please."

"What about Rose Landry?" Hayden says. "Were you gay then, too?"

"Oh my god, Hayd," Shane mutters, at the same time that Jackie sharply says, "*Babe!*" And then, much more sweetly, "Shane, hey. We're sorry about all the stuff with Rozanov. We didn't know. And obviously, like, it's totally fine with us that you're gay."

Hayden doesn't say anything to any of this, so Jackie probably has a hand tightly clamped around his wrist, making sure his mouth stays politely shut. Shane takes a few shuddering breaths, trying to will himself back into his own body. Wishing, ironically, that Ilya were here right now, that he could put his big hand down on the back of Shane's neck and squeeze into it, warm and solid and terribly, terribly missed. Even just imagining it helps a little; the small

ghost of Ilya's presence that Shane can conjure up in his mind is still powerful enough to stave off total hysteria.

"Holy shit, I wish I could drink right now," Jackie says.

Shane lets out a thin, watery laugh. Slowly, he raises his head.

"Please don't tell anyone," he says. "You can't tell anyone about this."

To his credit, Hayden quickly shakes his head. "We won't," he says. "Like, of course we wouldn't tell anyone."

"Thanks."

By the end of the night, when Shane is at the door and working the laces of his shoes, things feel a little more settled, into whatever the new normal between him and Hayden and Jackie will be. Hayden gives him a hug on his way out, which has never, ever happened before, and Shane is sure will never happen again.

"Hey man, uh, if you're happy, then I'm happy for you," he says, and Jackie nods, and Shane understands that this message was telepathically transmitted from Jackie's brain to her husband's in the way that married couples sometimes seem able to do.

Shane *is* happy. Fuck, so happy that he's miserable, actually. Miserable because the only thing that makes him happy anymore is being with Ilya, and Ilya isn't here, so all of Shane's happiness has flown away, too. All of Shane's happiness is currently living in a big house in Boston, tucked away like snowflakes in a set of golden curls, falling on a quiet Moscow street. Glittering in a pair of eyes so blue they shock the breath right out of him. Pumped like blood through a heartbeat that Shane desperately misses falling asleep to.

"I'm really happy," he says, because it's the closest thing to the truth.

He's happy. He's dying, but he's happy. If he doesn't see Ilya soon, feel Ilya's lips and hands and body covering every part of him, he's going to run into traffic, but he's never been happier in his whole life. This is what love is, apparently. This is what it means, to Shane, at least.

"Great," Jackie says. "That's all that matters, Shane."

Yeah, Shane thinks, it probably is.

Ilya steps outside to take Shane's call. It's not that it's loud where he is, that he's worried he won't be able to hear Shane above background noise or closer, louder voices. It's the opposite: too quiet where he's standing, and the general ambient din of the mall outside of the jewelry store is, a bit paradoxically, a more anonymous space. Ilya doesn't care if he's

overheard, not really. Let the world find out he loves a man– the most wonderful man, the fucking pinnacle of their sport. Ilya thinks, in a lot of ways, that would be easier. But it's Shane who deserves the privacy, who puts all of his precious trust in Ilya to keep him safe.

“Hello, *lyubimyy*,” he says.

“Hey. Sorry I didn't call you last night,” Shane says.

“Is okay,” Ilya says, though he thinks he may have worried himself into an ulcer over it. Shane's text– *I told them. It went okay. I'll call you tomorrow*– was just terse enough to make him wonder if Shane meant *okay* like really okay, or *okay* the way he sometimes means when he wants to say, *It wasn't okay, but I am too upset to talk about it*.

“So,” Ilya says now, broaching the subject. “It went okay? All is good with Hayden and Mrs. Pike?”

“Jackie.”

“Okay. Jackie. They were nice?”

“I mean, they're my friends. They're going to be nice.” Shane sighs. “Yeah, it went kind of how I expected it to. Everyone acts like you're the devil incarnate because you fucked up my lineman last year. I'm probably a traitor to Montreal or something for this.”

“This is stupid. Is hockey, we fuck each other up.”

“I know. It's just dumb bullshit. Like we have to hate each other forever. Like Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage.”

“Who is this? X-Squad people? I told you I do not watch those.”

“They're wrestlers, Ilya,” Shane says, laughing. “You never watched wrestling?”

“Sorry, Shane, I was busy having social life. Are they hot at least? Would make sense why you watch it, then.”

“Fuck you.” He's still laughing, and Ilya feels warm across his whole body, hearing Shane's smile curl around his words. “This is kind of like if it turned out they were fucking the whole time, too. People would have a hard time coming to terms with it.”

“Ah. So Hayden is having hard time coming to terms.”

“He said he's happy as long as I'm happy,” Shane says. “Which is kind of like, *fuck that guy, but you're still my friend*, you know?”

“*Lyubimyy*, maybe it just means what it means. Maybe there is no double meaning and he is just happy for you?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Shane sighs again. It's quiet in the background. Ilya wonders where he is, if he's standing in his kitchen, working on his second protein shake, or about to head to the gym. Or just sitting on his couch, the light brown leather one that Ilya remembers feeling cold and slippery where his knee was propped up on it, fucking down into Shane's taut body. If Ilya knew where Shane was, it would be easier to picture himself beside him.

Shane is, apparently, done talking about it. "Anyway, how are you? What are you doing right now?"

Ilya could tell him. He wonders if he should. Since Paris, there have been no secrets between them. Shane told him about his sore shoulder and the unbelievably boring minutia of his latest marketing contracts. Ilya told Shane about how his ankle feels like a ball rattling around inside an empty can, but that the team doctors are still letting him skate. Information he probably shouldn't be telling the captain of an opposing team, but they talk about everything. They can't help it. It feels incongruent, wrong, to have something to want to tell Shane, and not to do it.

It's a surprise, though, is the thing. There is a difference between a surprise and a secret, Ilya thinks. It's a *good* thing to keep a surprise from someone until it's time for them to know. Telling him now, unceremoniously, on the second floor of this mall, that would be the bad thing. That would spoil the surprise.

And it's not like he's keeping it to himself because he is afraid, or anything. That he might tell Shane on the phone and hear only a long, uncomfortable silence back. Or a sharp intake of breath. Or worse. *Oh, Ilya. Wow. Sorry. I didn't really mean any of that. It was fun to say all those things in Paris. It was fun to pretend, but that isn't really something I want.*

No, it's just that it's a *surprise*.

"I am at the mall," Ilya says. Easier to tell half of a truth. "I liked bag I found for Yuna so much, I was thinking of going to get same one for myself." He can sense Shane lose interest the minute he starts talking about shopping, but it's okay. "I will call you later, show off my new purse, okay?"

Shane laughs. "I am not letting you fuck me if you buy a purse, Ilya."

"Oh, you are not? I would have you eating out of it in no time."

He gives the jeweler an apologetic look when he steps back inside. The guy has put the clamshell box away while Ilya was outside talking to Shane, and he steps away to retrieve it, comes back to him with it pried delicately open and sitting in the palm of one giant hand, presenting its contents to Ilya. It's impressive, Ilya thinks, that he can do such tiny engraving, create such a delicate piece of jewelry, with such large hands. Ilya would have thought it difficult.

"Is it possible to have it sent somewhere?" Ilya says.

Because of the surprise. Of course, it's because of the surprise of it all. Not because he thinks it might be easier to absorb Shane's reaction if he isn't there to see it in person. That he thinks

Shane will be happy, but he doesn't know, not completely. And that tiny bit of not knowing is making him feel a little cowardly. A little scared.

"Sure," the man says. He pulls out a notepad and tears off a page of the thin paper. "Just write the address here."

Ilya wonders, not for the first time, if this will make a difference. Put some pressure on the wound in his chest, staunch some bleeding. Maybe he'll feel it, over in Montreal, feel some part of him there with Shane, more than names saved in their phones and Yuna Hollander's text messages. Maybe this will feel more substantial than all of that. A real promise that Ilya intends to keep.

Or maybe he'll find that the problem is, no matter what he does, Shane isn't here, and Ilya isn't there. And Ilya's chronic Lack-of-Paris Syndrome won't resolve itself until that changes.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe there is only one chapter left 😭 I'll save all my self-indulgent thoughts for the end but, like, what an endeavor this has been!

BTW, do not use my definition of Paris Syndrome as the real definition of Paris Syndrome, which is very specific to tourists having weird psychosomatic reactions to Paris. I used a lot of poetic license with it. Just wanted to put that out there in case someone read that and was like, "huh, that is Not Right." I know 😭

Anyway, thank you again for the love and comments and kudos, and I'll take more of those, *thank yew*. *Jangles cup that has 3 coins in it*. You guys are really amazing readers, thank you for your thoughts and feelings and your time that I have borrowed while you read this! Reading long-running WIPs really is such a labor of love, and I do not take it lightly that you have been along on the ride here when there are so many wonderful fics out there, so thank you a million times.

As always, come see my increasingly unhinged opinions on [tumblr!](#)

Chapter 14: Tomorrow, At Dawn

Chapter Summary

Ilya makes Shane a promise. Shane makes one, too.

Chapter Notes

Last chapter 🤔

Title is, of course, [Tomorrow, At Dawn](#) by Victor Hugo.

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

Shane's mail room at his condo comes with an app. Shane does not always appreciate this perk of apartment life, because it requires the mailman to snap a picture of the package and upload it with a QR code in order to retrieve it, and because one time that package happened to be rather indiscreetly marked as *Exquisite Fantasies, Inc.* and filled with lube and dildos, and Shane had felt himself almost pass away staring at the photo when the notification hit his phone. He had left a scathing anonymous review on the website in a sort of pyrrhic catharsis afterwards. Ever since, he's always felt his heart rate spike a little when he sees *You've Received a Package!* pop up enthusiastically at the top of his screen.

He is at practice, shrugging back into street clothes, pulling his phone out of his bag to see if Ilya's texted him— three unread messages, and a photo, so probably nothing he can open here in front of God and the whole Metros team— and there it is: *You've Received a Package!*

His stomach drops out of habit. He angles his phone towards himself unnecessarily to press the notification, not remembering until the app is pulled up and he's staring at a blurry image of a box and its accompanying QR code that he doesn't have any packages he's expecting. The return address is not for anything he recognizes, either: *Richman Brothers*, which sounds like it could be an attorney's office or something, and the address: *100 Huntington Avenue, Suite 300, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.*

Shane's heart lurches, the way it does whenever he sees anything that reminds him remotely of Ilya. *Boston*. Here is what he'll do to ameliorate it: he'll take a picture of the box when he picks it up from the mail room, and text a photo of the address to Ilya, just to have something to talk to him about. *Know where this is?* And then Ilya can tell him all about some neighborhood in Boston while Shane preps his dinner, and Ilya can say, *I will take you there when you visit*, and Shane can feel that push-pull of being so happy and so sad at the same time. He's felt more or less nothing else since they returned home.

He thinks about texting him now, something like, *I got something in the mail that I didn't order, should I open it?* And Ilya will probably say, *Nooo Shane they are trying to kill you, is mail bomb, Admirals put a hit out with mafia.* And he probably would, if he wasn't pretty sure the photo waiting for him to open is a picture of Ilya's dick in his hand.

So he waits, and puts his phone away until he's safely in his car, and then opens their messages, running his tongue out to wet his lips.

[Ilya]

Shane look we do arts and crafts at practice today

[Photo]

I made this for you))

do you like it? I am pretty good artist I think I have fallback career when hockey is over

The photo is not, as Shane feared and hoped in equal measure, a photo of Ilya's hard cock. Instead, it's a crooked etching of a heart in cloudy ice, ostensibly at Boston's practice rink, wobbly and overshot in places where Ilya carved a bit too hard with his skates. In the middle, it looks like he tried to scratch out a version of their initials: *I + S*.

Shane stares at the photo and can feel his eyes go hot. So happy it makes his chest burn. So sad that his ribs feel like they are about to break. He is hurting either way. It's so goofy and romantic and Shane loves him and also thinks he might die.

He wonders if anyone else on the Raiders saw it. If they said, maybe, *who the fuck is S?* And what Ilya might have said. God, what if it was this: *S is for Shane. Shanya. Because I love him.* Shane must be really going crazy, missing Ilya like this, because he doesn't even feel scared at the possibility. Some part of him thinks he might not even care anymore if all of Boston knew.

He sends a message back as his car rumbles awake.

[Shane]

I think you'd better hope you have a long career in hockey, I don't think amateur ice sculptor is a real job

I'm heading home from practice now

I love you

He pulls out of the garage and heads the short distance home to his condo, rubbing his hand over his shoulder where it's needled at him for days. He tweaked it in the last game and it's been painful ever since, but not enough to be a true concern. He knows all he needs is some time on the floor with a foam roller, or an hour with the team PT, and he'll be eighty percent better.

Twenty minutes later, he is at his refrigerator, digging into his prepared meal without bothering to plate it, staring absently at the calendar on the fridge. It's labeled *2016-2017*

SEASON, half of the numbers obscured by the Eiffel Tower magnet holding it on the door. He used to look at the calendar and see standings, see contenders and layups and bye weeks and hard matchups and easy gimmies. Now he looks at the calendar and all he thinks is: Boston isn't coming to Montreal until March. It's weeks away.

His phone buzzes. Shane can tell it's Ilya just from the number of text messages all at once. No one else texts him this much. Maybe Hayden or Rose would, if he responded to them as much as he does Ilya. But he never would. There is no one else on earth he wants to talk to as much as Ilya.

[Ilya]

just home now. sorry was Devrys birthday had to show face at restaurant

they went to strip club but I had to come home for my private show)))

you are eating salmon and quinoa right now probably? like sea otter?

Shane snorts and snaps a picture of his half-eaten chicken breast with low-sodium chimichurri and charred broccoli rabe and sends it to Ilya. He puts the plastic container down on his countertop, poised to text something back, maybe call Ilya an asshole, but his screen is blocked by another notification from the mail app, reminding him he still needs to pick up his package. He'd totally forgotten about it in the rush to get home and hurry through his routine so he could have a nice long FaceTime with Ilya and no other distractions.

So Shane pockets his phone and toes into some slides and pads down to the mailroom to retrieve his package. This building only has eight other tenants, so he almost never sees anyone else when he's picking up his supplements and protein powder and the occasional more illicit items he can only find online. It's deserted now, and he keys in his PIN to the door and holds his app up to the locker's QR code reader so it will open for him.

The box is smaller than he thought it would be, perfectly square, no particular indication of what it could contain. It's very light; Shane figures an actual bomb would have to be pretty heavy to do any damage. He wonders if it's some promotional gift from a brand. Occasionally he gets swag he isn't expecting, mostly stuff he doesn't use. Jackie has already gratefully accepted a full-size unisex fragrance he got when he signed the Dior contract.

Shane takes a picture of the box's return address, the camera adjusting in the harsh light of the elevator until the letters come into focus. He sends it to Ilya before he realizes the Wi-Fi is shit, watches the indicator spin and spin as it tries and fails to send. Oh well. It finally goes through as he is closing his apartment door behind him.

He puts the box on the countertop and goes to finish his meal. *Buzz buzz buzz*. A bunch of messages all at once, probably queued up while he was in the dead zone of the elevator and mail room.

[Ilya]

careful shanya that almost looks like it tastes good

oh so you have secret admirer in boston?

is nice part of town I will show you when you visit

Shane smiles, reads the last few words of that sentence over and over. *When you visit. I will show you. When. I will.* It's the promise in the words that Shane is chasing. It's what he's been surviving off of, since Paris.

He finishes his chicken and bins the container, rinses off his fork and dumps it in the dishwasher. He fishes out a pair of scissors from one of the kitchen drawers and runs an easy slice through the taped opening. He thinks then that he might want to take a photo, in case his mom feels the need to send a thank you message to whichever sponsor provided this gift. He snaps a hasty shot of the package exterior, then slices open the rest of the tape and pops the flaps.

Inside there is a flurry of fancy gold and white paper, shredded into a sort of high end confetti. Shane snaps another photo and gingerly fishes around in the pile of paper shreds to find the thing they are meant to conceal. He feels it, a smaller box, soft under his fingers, like it's encased in velvet. When he pulls it out he sees it's a pretty burgundy clamshell box, the kind that houses jewelry.

Shane sets it on the counter in front of him, brushing his fingertips over the velvet. He looks at it, and feels his chest go tight, his breathing suddenly loud to his own ears.

A jewelry box. A Boston address.

It takes barely any effort at all to lift the little weighted top and let it spring gently open. Inside: a soft, pillowy lining, all burgundy like the exterior, shiny like satin and gathered at the center. Nestled, in the middle of all that ruching, a bit of shining, brushed gold.

A ring.

Shane has not ever really thought about what he might think, or say, or do, if someone gave him a ring. He always thought, if anything, he would be the one with the ring, the one giving it to someone else. Of course, Ilya is a guy, too, so there was no guarantee that it would happen that way. But still. Shane hadn't thought about it. So maybe it's for the best that he's alone, when he sees it, because his first thoughts are: *oh fuck, oh fuck, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.*

His chest goes warm and full, like he's taken a deep breath and sunk underwater. Everything is quiet in his ears, except the rush of blood through them, like a roaring train. He can feel his pulse, gone suddenly wild in his neck. Like he's at the apex of his cardio routine and not standing stock-still in his kitchen, holding a tiny box containing this little, shining, wonderful, beautiful thing. Oh fuck. Oh my god.

He picks the ring up, carefully, and places it flat in the palm of his hand. The outside is plain, unadorned gold, but the inside has an inscription carved into it. Elegant, tiny letters. Shane holds it closer, squinting to see the writing, loath to move to even fetch his glasses. He doesn't need them, anyway. He already knows what it says.

I love you forever

His eyes swim dangerously then, and he has to press his thumb hard into the corner of his eye, swallow down the painful lump that's risen in his throat, even as he's punching the call button on his phone, hearing the dial ring out. It would be so embarrassing to start crying before he's even had a chance to talk to Ilya, before Ilya even picks up.

The call connects, and there is Ilya, looking delighted to hear from him. Warm, soft curls everywhere, hanging damp down his forehead, like he is just out of the shower. Beautiful, he's beautiful. He is wearing a sort of guileless smile, like he doesn't know what Shane might be calling for. He's full of shit, of course, and Shane knows that now, knows because he sent him the thing about the box, and Ilya responded, *Oh, you have a secret admirer?* He should have known, then, that Ilya was the one who sent it.

"Hi, Shane," Ilya says.

"You asshole," Shane says, and has never sounded less convincing. His voice sounds like it could break into a million pieces, like he's barely keeping it together. "You can't take my inscription."

Ilya's smile, big and bright, goes soft around the edges at that, the way it does when he is also in danger of crying. Good, Shane thinks stupidly, it's mortifying to be the only one losing their shit here.

Ilya clears his throat, but his voice still sounds watery, hoarse when he speaks.

"There is no rule that says we can't have same thing on our rings."

Shane sounds just as rough, run over by emotion. "It's my rule. I'm making the rule."

"It makes sense, to have same rings," Ilya says softly, like he's taking this very seriously, like he needs to defend his choice to take Shane's inscription, too. Like it isn't a miracle, practically, that he remembered what Shane said, miserable on the flight back to Paris, that he tucked that into his heart and delivered it back to Shane so earnestly.

"Oh yeah?" Shane says.

Ilya nods solemnly. "Yes. Because we are husbands."

Shane feels, for a moment, overwhelmed. Taken over by a wave of happiness and sadness and wanting and missing Ilya so acutely that, briefly, it registers like a punch, a stab in the gut. It is very, very unfair of Ilya to do this when Shane is in Montreal, and can't reach out and sink his fingers into Ilya's soft, shower-damp curls and kiss the watery smile off of his face and just feel him there, has to instead take what he can get from the tiny confines of his phone screen.

Shane bites his lip, hard, and it helps. It takes his mind off the bloom of pain below his ribs.

"Show me?" Ilya says. His brows are furrowed, watching Shane.

Shane nods. He slips on the ring, cool and smooth against his finger. He holds his hand up to the screen, so Ilya can see. Ilya's entire face reacts with something like devastation, his pretty,

lush mouth curving downward, his eyes following, red seeping in at the edges right away. He blinks hard, but can't completely stop them from going wet and glassy, bright pink spots appearing at the high points of his cheeks.

"Oh, good, it fits," Ilya says, and sniffs, clears his throat again. "Do you like it?"

Shane looks at Ilya, drinks him in. If he can't kiss him, can't hold him, he can at least do that. Ilya is so beautiful, even with red eyes, even with all the muscles in his face tensed up, trying to keep himself from crying. The most beautiful man Shane has ever seen. Beautiful, and stupid, if he doesn't know the answer to that already. If they weren't hours away from each other, hundreds of kilometers, surely Ilya would be able to tell. There would be no doubt, no doubt at all about how Shane could feel about any of this. The ring, or what it means, what Ilya is asking him for. It would be so plainly obvious.

"I love it, Ilya. I love it so much."

Ilya lets out a long exhale, like he had been holding his breath, and smiles, just the corners of his lips. His eyes are still red, and sad, but at least he's smiling, eyes locked on the ring where Shane has it in view of the camera.

"Good. I'm glad, Shane."

"What about yours?" Shane says. He is impressed with himself, that his voice only cracks slightly when he does.

Ilya makes an aborted little shrug of a movement, a play at lightheartedness. It is betrayed only a little by the tears Shane can still see brimming at the corners of his eyes.

"Obviously, I cannot buy my own ring, Shane. You are supposed to give it to me."

"Okay." Shane nods. "Okay, Yeah. I will, Ilya."

They stay on the line with each other for another hour, even though they are mostly quiet, too raw to work up the appetite to get each other off or to even joke around that much. So Shane just tells Ilya about his day, every mundane and normal and boring part of it, and Ilya nods and smiles like just hearing Shane ramble about nothing is enough for him to be happy off of. Maybe it is. It certainly is for Shane.

None of the rest of his day, of course, holds a candle to the gleaming gold ring on his finger, twinkling just out of his eyeline. He keeps noticing it, can't stop noticing. Ilya's ring. Ilya's *I love you forever*. Ilya wants him forever, loves him this much. Who cares how practice went, how their lines are looking halfway through the season? Ilya bought him a fucking ring and it's on his fucking finger. Still, Shane talks, and Ilya listens, and it's lovely just to see his face and hear his little hums of assent or scoffs or the way he sucks the back of his teeth, sympathetically annoyed at something on Shane's behalf.

It really is all Shane ever wants to see, or hear, or do, always. Listen to Ilya, look at Ilya, tell Ilya every little dumb thing.

When they finally hang up, Shane stretches himself out on the floor with his foam roller and tries to untangle the tightness in his shoulder. He spends fifteen minutes there, laid out, unfocused, before he straightens back up and resolves to first try untangling the tightness in his chest instead.

He bookmarks five different jewelers in Montreal to call in the morning. He has no idea what buying a ring or having one engraved entails, or how long it takes, but he's planning to throw enough money at someone who does that it won't matter anyway.

Already, he finds his fingers going to his other hand, twisting the ring around and around. Maybe he's too fidgety for one of these, too easily lured into worrying at it by his swirling thoughts. That idea bothers him. Like somehow it means he isn't suited for this, for being someone else's with a physical bit of evidence to prove it. It feels a little like he's letting Ilya down. Shane resolves to leave it alone, but.

But that's not all of it, of course. It's also what he's thinking about, in particular. He's thinking that he wants to wear it, of course he does, all the time. He wants to feel the metal cool against his skin, this completely novel sensation, and think of Ilya every single time he remembers that it's there. *I love you forever*, pressed against him like a kiss. But, like, *fuck*. How is he going to be able to do that?

It will be hard enough to wear it without attracting the immediate scrutiny of every single teammate upon his first walk-in into the locker room, let alone the media, if they see a mystery ring on his hand. He will probably need to keep it in a pocket or in his backpack, which defeats the purpose, doesn't it? He doesn't *want* to hide it in his clothes or in his bag or keep it safe in a drawer in his house, to take out only when they are alone. He wants it on his body, wants it as close to him as he can possibly keep it. But he doesn't know how.

Fuck, they should have talked about this. They need to talk. They need to see each other. Or at least, Shane needs to see Ilya, so badly that he isn't sure he can figure out the rest of it without him there. He just needs him. Everything else will work out once he has Ilya there again. Shane is sure of it.

March is too long to wait.

Shane sits on the floor of his condo, his foam roller stowed in his lap, and starts looking for flights to Boston.

The following week, Shane calls Ilya with his heart in his throat from the tarmac outside gate fifty at Montreal-Trudeau. People are still trudging down the central thoroughway of the plane, mercifully slowly, slow enough that Shane hopes the flight attendants won't see him using his phone through the shuffling throng. Normally, he already has it in airplane mode by now. He doesn't know if it's okay to keep calling people once you're already on the plane, or if somewhere a flight attendant is staring daggers at him, trying to wade through the sea of bored and antsy travelers to come tell him to turn his phone off this minute or the plane will be late to depart.

That is most likely not the case. That has, probably, never happened to anyone, anywhere. Even so, Shane turns himself away from the aisle and closer to the window, secludes himself

a little further from any watchful authority, and listens to the call ring in his ear.

“Shane?” Ilya says. He sounds groggy and tired, which might be fair, as it is just a few minutes before six in the morning. Shane, though, has been awake for hours, giving up on sleep long before his alarm was set to get him early to the airport. He’s already drunk a couple of coffees he doesn’t really feel over the tense anticipation of this flight and everything after. “Shane, good morning, hi.”

“Hi. Do you feel okay? You sound tired.”

“Yes, well, someone kept me on the phone very late last night and is now calling me early in the morning and asking if I am tired.”

Shane snorts a little laugh. Ilya is being a little dramatic, it wasn’t *that* late. Shane is sure Ilya got him off before it even turned midnight.

“Sorry.”

“Is okay. I like talking to you more than sleep. Is everything okay, *lyubimyy*? You just miss me so much you want to hear me snore on phone?”

Ilya punctuates this with a yawn breathed carelessly into the speaker, which makes Shane’s heart briefly clench in a tight, burning ache for him. For quiet, dark mornings in the Paris apartment and becoming conscious to the sound of Ilya yawning awake.

“That too, but. Listen,” Shane says, casting his eyes back up the aisle, but there are still no flight attendants coming to wrest the phone from his hands, so he feels safe enough to be a little indirect. “Are you doing anything today?”

“Hm? No, not really. I was thinking maybe I will go to gym this morning, but that’s it. Why?”

“Well, I need a favor.”

“Ah, favor from me,” Ilya says. Shane can hear his smile curling around the words. It’s so early, and Shane is so giddy and tense, that the heat in Ilya’s voice just makes his eyes sting, makes him feel soft and fond instead of turned on. “I want to hear more about this favor you need that only I can help you with.”

Shane looks out the window at his left. Staff in neon safety shirts are puttering around outside the plane, loading luggage for people staying far longer than Shane will be able to. He has a game on Thursday; he will have to be back on another plane in less than forty-eight hours. Everything he needs for such a short visit can be packed into a duffel bag and shoved under his seat. What Shane would give to have so much time that he would need to pack a bag that couldn’t fit inside the cabin with him.

“My plane lands at Boston Logan in about two hours, so. I need a ride into town,” Shane says.

He hears the sharp catch of Ilya's breath. "Shane. Are you serious?" He suddenly sounds very alert, all the sleepy gravel vanished from his voice.

"I get in at seven forty-five."

"Oh my god, Shane," Ilya says. "I thought you had something Wednesday. And game against New Jersey on Thursday."

He's right, of course. He has Shane's calendar and Shane has his, and so they both know that this carve-out did not naturally exist in Shane's week, that in the world before Paris, Shane treated his free time with casual indifference, allowed it to be filled with advertising bookings and ESPN promos and other garbage without knowing how precious it would become. In Wednesday's case, a fucking YouTube video for Bon Appetit, where he's supposed to show Dave Chang around his favorite restaurants in Montreal. His mom had said they weren't happy with the last-minute cancellation, said that they probably wouldn't reach out again, as if that matters to Shane at all, as if it's critically important that the YouTube general public knows his opinions on pizza and ramen. Oh well, someone else will just have to slurp noodles on camera at Yokato Yokabai.

Shane says, "I do. I have the game. I cancelled the other thing. So I don't have to go home until tomorrow night."

Ilya lets out a breath slowly, like he's trying to control it, keep it from releasing all at once in a great gust.

"Ah, this is very sad. Yuna Hollander will hate me again. I am ruining your brand recognition."

"I think she'll forgive you this once."

"I am... fuck, Shane. I am very happy. I think, maybe, I'm dreaming, because I did not think you would do something like this just to see me."

"Well, yeah, of course I would," Shane says. "And also..."

"And also...?"

In Shane's bag, secured in a tight roll of t-shirts, is a clamshell jewelry box, emerald where Ilya's was burgundy, leather-bound instead of velvet, but otherwise very much the same. Very much carrying the same cargo. After all, it was Shane's inscription first. Not his fault, that the love of his life is a dirty thief.

"And also... I have something to give you," Shane says, eyes closing as he does. Because it hurts, it aches between his ribs, right where his heart sits. He presses his knuckles into his sternum and says, "And I need to do it in person. And I couldn't wait until March. I just couldn't."

Ilya sniffs. It's a little muffled, like maybe he tried to stifle the sound behind his hand, but Shane hears it. He says something low in Russian, and it only bothers Shane a little, in that

greedy way he has developed lately, the need to know and understand absolutely everything Ilya thinks and says and feels.

Then, in English, Ilya says, “I will be there.”

Shane sends him the flight itinerary before he puts his phone on airplane mode for good, just in case the Wi-Fi is too spotty for it. He keeps his eyes open until the men in the safety vests have departed beyond his little porthole window, until the intercom crackles with the tinny voice of a flight attendant announcing an on-time departure, and droning politely through the emergency procedures, but he feels them start, finally, to grow heavy.

A draining kind of relief settles over him, flows down through his whole body as the plane doors are armed and locked and they start to rumble away from their gate and out toward the runway. Like everything that has been out of alignment, for weeks now, has clicked back into place. Like he’s finally en route to where he needs to be. It carries him down into the first real drowsiness he’s felt all morning, and he is asleep before the wheels are even off the ground.

Ilya waits in the parking garage across from Terminal B, a scant hour and forty-five minutes after Shane woke him up with probably the best phone call Ilya has ever received. Shane, clearing his schedule to come to Boston for him. For two days, he gets to have Shane in his house. Shane in his bed, Shane in his living room, Shane in his kitchen and backyard and shower. The warm weight of Shane’s head on his chest at night. The soft shiver of his exhaled breath against Ilya’s skin. Ilya can barely believe it.

He texted Shane his location when he pulled into the garage, then dropped a pin and sent that too. There is, then, nothing left to do but wait, phone in hand, for Shane to call or text him when his plane touches down.

Ilya fiddles anxiously with his music, volume down, volume up, skip, skip, skip, finding nothing that he wants to hear. He reads the same three sports articles he read fifteen minutes ago. He tries the radio, instead, and it’s all morning programming for the daily commute, dumb jock humor and celebrity gossip and people calling in with embarrassing stories in order to win concert tickets. Ilya listens to a guy with the most egregious Boston accent he’s ever heard talk about getting banned from his local Dunkin’ Donuts for drunk and disorderly conduct. The taffy pull of the way he mangles the phrase— *dis-aw-duh-ly cahn-duct*— sends dissonant static through Ilya’s brain. The jocks all laugh uproariously and the guy comes away with Maroon 5 tickets at TD Garden for his troubles.

Finally, Shane texts him that they’ve landed. Ilya’s heart jumps immediately, like a dog that’s heard its owner approach the door. Little traitor that it is, living inside Ilya’s body, but clearly belonging to someone else. Ilya sends back a string of hearts in a little kaleidoscope of rainbow colors, a few of the two men kissing in emphasis. Probably reckless, now that they have their real names in each other’s phones, and Shane is out in public reading Ilya’s texts. It’s not impossible to imagine him getting pulled into a fan photo with his phone in his hand

and some intrepid internet detectives zooming all the way into his screen to see just who he's been texting with all the hearts and man-on-man kiss emojis.

Ilya has been finding lately, though, that he cares less and less. His father is dead. Alexei has moved his family into Ilya's Moscow condo, Ilya's stuff presumably thrown away or tossed in some storage unit that he will never visit. Shane's already told one teammate about them, and one A-List Hollywood actress who Ilya hopes personally to never meet. Ilya has Yuna Hollander's contact info and a standing invitation to dinner when the Raiders play in Ottawa next. He almost doesn't understand anymore, what they would be trying to protect themselves from.

Shane, too, used to follow up any remotely lewd text with a hasty *delete that* for a coda, but that hasn't happened lately, not since Paris. If the worst came to pass, if they were outed and Boston wanted the fag cut from their team, Ilya would probably just marry Shane and hop the border. The only thing about this plan that doesn't sound like absolute paradise is having people think he would only marry Shane for Canadian citizenship.

Shane sends him a play-by-play of his movement through the airport, far more detail than Ilya needs, but it still renders him syrupy with affection and so antsy to see Shane that he finds himself gripping the steering wheel and staring hard at the elevator doors, like he can manifest Shane into appearing through them with enough concentration.

[Shane]

Just taxied to the gate, waiting for the doors to open

Doors just opened, waiting for people in front of me to deboard

Ugh this guy is so slow getting his bags

Okay he's finally walking

Deboarding

We're all the way at the end of the terminal, heading to the garage now

Almost there

[Ilya]

on first floor just next to elevators

i bring my most boring car for you)))

He counts down thirty seconds. Another thirty. The morning radio hosts have moved on to asking people to call in with their online dating horror stories. A girl is talking about being catfished by a fifty-year-old guy with a wife and two kids. Ilya turns off the radio, then the car, and gets out.

He isn't really supposed to do this, because Shane could be in the elevator with a whole host of strangers, maybe an entire family of the biggest hockey fans in Boston. Ilya should probably be more discreet, should probably not be *trying*, practically, to get caught waiting

for Shane Hollander in the Boston Logan Terminal B Parking Garage. He should probably not be walking to the elevator bay and waiting directly in front of it, bouncing on the balls of his feet, checking his phone over and over.

The numbers on the elevator's count up and pause on *A*— is that *A* for *Arrivals*? Please, let it be— then down, *D, PI*, and stop, and the doors open.

And then, there is Shane.

He looks, incongruously, almost exactly like he did when Ilya saw him last: hands jammed deep into the pockets of his navy sweatshirt, hood drawn up around his face, eyes dark and tired, hair an unstyled mess across his forehead. It gives Ilya the strangest feeling, like maybe the last three weeks were a dream. Like perhaps they passed through a wormhole instead of getting on separate planes, and Shane is just now getting off the flight from Paris right into Ilya's waiting arms. Like no time has passed at all.

Shane's eyes go big and glassy as soon as he sees him. "Ilya."

And Ilya can't help himself. That's the defense he'll use, anyway, if he ruins everything with this, if they play the security footage in court when they kick him out of the MLH for the crime of loving Shane Hollander. It's just, he is *here*, and then Ilya needs to touch him, because what else can he possibly do? Ilya has spent a decade fighting the desire to touch Shane every time they are together in public, and he doesn't want to anymore. He finds, in fact, that he can't.

And so Ilya puts his arms out and Shane steps out of the elevator and the only thing Ilya can do is cover Shane's whole body with his own, wrap his arms all the way around him and lift him up off the ground, even with the considerable effort that takes, and bury his face into Shane's neck so he doesn't do something truly insane like kiss Shane on the mouth in the middle of this very public parking garage.

Shane's breath leaves his body in a shocked exhale, but he allows all of it, sinking into Ilya's embrace, digging fingers into the back of Ilya's jacket and letting Ilya hold him so tightly that it probably hurts, probably would earn Ilya a minor on the ice for how hard he's crushing Shane's ribs. Ilya's heart is beating so fast, there's no way Shane can't hear it. It must be echoing throughout the parking garage, bouncing off the walls, maybe across the entire airport and the city of Boston. Maybe everyone in the whole city can hear the desperate Morse code that it is tapping out inside Ilya's chest. *Shane. My Shane. Finally, the other half of my heart. He's here.*

Ilya says, "Fuck. Fuck, I missed you so much."

Shane's voice is muffled from where his lips are pressed, damningly, against Ilya's temple, his breath fanning out along Ilya's sideburns. "Me too, I missed you, too."

The god of volcanoes and empty hockey rinks and text messages sent just in time must still be smiling on them today, because no one comes up or down the elevators to catch them in the act. No one sees Ilya's hand come up to cradle the back of Shane's head, or the way he

shifts closer against Shane's neck, grazing it with his lips, and no one hears Shane's breath catch when he does. No one but him.

God, he could stay here forever. He would, probably, if the rest of the day didn't promise anything better. But it does, and he doesn't want to borrow any more time from himself, time they have ahead of them to be more intelligently spent in Ilya's bed and not racking up a dollar-fifty-per-minute charge the longer his Bentley sits in its overpriced parking spot. So he extricates himself apologetically, shifts back in Shane's arms, just to get a better look at him, tired and still so pretty despite it, dark circles under his lovely eyes that Ilya aches to massage away.

"Okay, come on," Ilya says, his laugh so thin that he knows it isn't fooling either of them. "Is enough of a show for everyone." He picks up Shane's bag and slings it up his arm, heads off back toward his car.

"I can carry my bag," Shane says, following behind him.

"Ah, no. You said your shoulder was bothering you."

"It's not a big deal. I can carry my bag."

"So sorry, we are already here," Ilya says as they reach the trunk of his car, pouting out his bottom lip, just to make Shane huff in fond exasperation.

He fishes into his pocket for his keys and hits the button to open the hatch and toss the bag into the back. Shane is peering at his car with interest, like Ilya thought he might when he chose it for the airport this morning. Of all the cars he owns, this one is the most Shane-like in its design, boxy and black and the polar opposite of the Porsche he drove them around Paris in.

"This is pretty nice," Shane says, and it feels almost as good as when Ilya makes him moan beneath him in bed. He feels a similar pride, a similar swell of accomplishment, at least. Shane puts his hand on the door, like he's assessing the feel of the matte black finish under his fingers. "I don't know why you said it was boring."

"You have not seen my other cars."

He unlocks the doors and they slide into their seats, Shane glancing around appreciatively at the red-on-black stitching, the ruby Bentley insignia detailed into his seat. Ilya is acutely aware that he can never tell Shane how deeply thrilled he is to have impressed him. Shane would never let him live it down. If Shane knew just how much of what Ilya does is done solely to impress him, well. He would finally know just how much Ilya is wrapped helplessly around his finger.

Ilya says, "I will buy one for you, since you like it so much."

"I have a car."

"Yes, what do you drive? A Jeep? Wow, *exciting*."

“Asshole.” Shane clicks into his seatbelt. “It’s a Land Rover.”

“Ah, okay. That is so much better, you are right, Shane. Definitely not boring car for old people.”

“Shut up, it’s not boring, it’s *fine*. How does this handle in the snow?”

“See, you are interested,” Ilya says. “I will get you special edition from Svetlana. Black with gold detail. Raiders colors, for your favorite team.”

“Fuck off,” Shane says, and pulls Ilya by the back of his head across the center console to press a kiss to Ilya’s grinning mouth. Shane licks between his teeth, searching him out, sighing when Ilya meets him with his tongue.

It’s almost overwhelming, tasting him again after so long. Feeling the pillow of Shane’s lips hot and urgent against his own, the eager slide of his tongue. It feels like home. Ilya could crawl up inside here and never leave. Rack up a thousand dollars in parking charges, just to kiss Shane for hours, or days.

Shane pulls away long before either of them are ready, looking apologetic for it, but they are still out in public, and Ilya’s windows are not nearly tinted enough for the kind of kiss he wants from Shane right now.

“How far is it to your house?” Shane says, apparently thinking the same thing.

“Not so far. Right now, I don’t know. Traffic is pretty bad. Probably forty minutes?” Ilya grins, reaches out to brush his fingers out across Shane’s cheek, pat it lightly. “Do you think you can wait that long for me?”

“Do *you*?” Shane says, slumping down into his seat a little. Ilya can see that he’s a little out of breath, too, that his eyes have come away a little unfocused.

Truthfully, Ilya also chose this car because it’s spacious enough that he could throw Shane across the back seat right now and fuck him in it, if Shane would let him. A very remote possibility, but Ilya wanted to be prepared just in case.

He’s going to try some restraint, though. It will be all that much sweeter when he has Shane in his house, falling apart for him, maybe crying for it, begging for him. It will be worth the wait.

Ilya just smiles, imagining the noises Shane will be making soon. He sinks his fingers into the hair at the back of Shane’s head, tugs a little. Shane leans back into the palm of his hand, his eyes going lidded, and it’s almost enough to get Ilya to change his mind about the order of things. But no, he’s good at this. He can wait.

He pulls the Bentley out of the garage, and soon they have joined up with the rest of the unfortunate souls crawling in traffic on westbound I-90. Ilya reaches for Shane’s hand and laces their fingers together, and then he’s grateful for the traffic, because he can drink in the

smile Shane gives him for as long as he wants. A luxury, five miles an hour, all the time in the world, just to look and look and look at Shane.

“How was your flight?”

“Good, I guess,” Shane says. “I fell asleep before we took off.”

“That is good. I will not let you sleep very much, so it is better that you took care of all of that already.”

A little smile curls across Shane’s face, that Ilya would really like to lick away, if he didn’t have to worry about driving them off the road. “Oh, really? No sleep at all?”

“No sleep at all,” Ilya says solemnly. “If you try to, I will just give you head until you wake up again.”

Shane laughs. “Well, when you put it like that.”

It ends up taking just under an hour to get back home, a slog through a series of dark, gloomy underpasses that don’t afford any view of the city. Shane doesn’t seem to mind, doesn’t really look out the window much, anyway. Ilya can feel Shane’s eyes on him every time he turns toward the road. He has Shane’s hand in his lap, clasped tightly in his, so that he can press kisses along the back of it as he drives, run his lips absently over Shane’s rough knuckles.

The view doesn’t sort itself out until they are almost to Ilya’s house, off the turnpike entirely, where the roads open up, spacious and tree-lined and dotted with big, borderline ostentatious houses. Though, Ilya is proud to say, none are as big and ostentatious as his.

He steers them up his long, private driveway, pausing for the gate to retract and allow them through, and then into his garage, where he slots the SUV up against his lime green Huracan.

They get out, Ilya shouldering Shane out of the way before he can grab his own bag. Shane makes up for it by gesturing at Ilya’s Lamborghini and giving it a little derisive snort.

“Cool car,” he says.

Ilya wants to bare his teeth and sink them into Shane’s neck. Fuck, he missed him being a little brat. He feels his dick stir against his thigh even as he is chirping back.

“Yes, it is. You would know this, if you were cool.”

“Just the two? You made it sound like you had a collection.”

“I do, but I do not park the Chiron here. Costs almost as much as the house. Would not be very smart.”

Shane rolls his eyes, like this is the dumbest thing he’s ever heard. Like it’s not, frankly, insane for a multi-millionaire to drive a Land Rover, as if he’s in witness protection. Ilya will have him in a Bentley, at minimum, if it’s the last thing he does. Anything less is embarrassing just by association.

They go inside through the garage door, and a strange quiet descends on them as Shane is toeing off his shoes in the foyer and Ilya hovers behind him with his bag hitched up his shoulder. A weird realization, maybe, that so much has changed since the last time Shane was here. Shane turns to him, a little sheepishly, like he's thinking about it, too.

It's almost hard to remember now, how hopeless Ilya had felt about it all. It's hard to remember a time before he felt the depth of Shane's love down to the marrow of him, a time when he wasn't even sure he would ever get a chance to even touch him again.

If Paris hadn't happened at all, would he still be wallowing in that awful place? Would something, fate or whatever it may be, have conspired to pull them together again eventually? Or did it really take a natural disaster for Ilya to let himself love Shane like this? To just crack himself open and pour all of this desperate love out for Shane to draw it all in, hold it close, treat him like he is something precious, something worth loving just as much?

Ilya is almost afraid to think about it, because he doesn't see how any other version of his life could have been better than this. Because that *isn't* how it happened. Paris *did* happen, miraculously, and his whole world irrevocably changed. It isn't worth thinking about any other hypotheticals. He has the best version of it, right here, and now Shane is back in his house, standing with him on the other side of it all, and that is all Ilya should be thinking about anymore. That is all that matters.

"Do you want the tour?" Ilya says, grinning, shaking off the remnants of that memory, that other life.

"I've been here before," Shane says, and mercifully, he's smiling too. God, Ilya missed him.

"Hm. No. I don't remember this," Ilya says, stepping closer. "Are you sure?"

Ilya puts his hands out, reaching for Shane's waist, maneuvering them toward the kitchen with fistfuls of the soft fabric of Shane's sweatshirt. He drops Shane's bag by the island, then pulls him close, lines the two of them up, so Shane's legs are caught between his. He slides his hands up beneath Shane's hoodie and sinks them into the warm, taut skin of his stomach, takes big palming handfuls of him, mapping everything he's missed for weeks now. He takes his time touching him, relearning how all these beloved little places on his body feel under his hands, how it feels to have Shane pressed right up against him, thrumming like he's being run through with electricity, burning under Ilya's touch. It is enough to drive Ilya crazy. He feels his want like a physical pain, a bruise along his chest and his crotch, blood rushing everywhere. Ilya can't believe he survived without this for so long.

Shane, oh god, Shane.

Shane's eyes slide closed and he lets his head drop back. Ilya wants to bite him, suck at the hollow of his collarbone, close his teeth around the bridge of Shane's Adam's apple and sink in. He feels his mouth fill with spit like he's fucking starving. He kisses the wild pulse in Shane's neck, drags his tongue along under his chin, catching against the pinpricks of stubble there. Shane's skin is tacky with travel sweat and Ilya licks it off, wet when he comes away, a shining rope of saliva connecting his mouth to Shane's neck, his jawline.

Ilya could probably fuck Shane through his sweats right now, he's so hard. His cock aches where it is pressed into the junction of Shane's hip and thigh. Shane's hands are digging into the small of his back and Ilya hopes he's leaving a mark with how hard he's squeezing in. He hopes he can see it later, Shane's desire tattooed across him.

"Ilya," Shane breathes, and Ilya has to kiss him, has to lick his own name out of Shane's mouth, bruise his lips red and puffy and pretty, make a beautiful mess of him.

"God, Shane."

He slots one leg between Shane's so he can grind his thigh into Shane's dick, hard already for him, a little wet spot catching against his own clothes. He can feel the damp heat of it along his leg, aches to suck it into a big, ruined splotch, see if he can taste the salt and sour of Shane's precome through the fabric.

Fuck, he feels fucking crazy, so hard and wanting it might render him insane. He almost can't focus enough to decide what he wants, what he means to demand Shane do with his lips against Shane's ear and his hand curled hard into Shane's dark hair.

Should he make Shane drop to his knees and fish Ilya's cock out of his pants, so he can watch that lovely long tongue make wet circles around the ridge of his head? Should he take Shane's hand and shove it down his pants, see how long Shane is satisfied just with touching Ilya's cock, curling his rough fingers around it and letting Ilya fuck into his fist, until he's begging Ilya to give him more, let him taste it or sink it into his pretty asshole? Or just flip Shane over now, press him down into the kitchen island with all of Ilya's weight, and give him a rough inaugural fuck right here?

Just the friction of their bodies together, right now, fully clothed and boxed up against his marble countertop, might be enough to get him most of the way there. He's so fucking turned on that he's a little worried he might embarrass himself. It's already starting to go that way, Shane's moans into his mouth taking the tenor that they do when he's about to start begging, gone off the pleasure and the desperation: *fuck me, Ilya, god, please*. Ilya is going to have to concentrate very hard on not coming as soon as Shane uses that slutty little voice and turns his watery brown eyes on him.

But instead, Shane puts his hands on Ilya's chest, pressing back on him, breaking away from his mouth, pulling his head back when Ilya tries to kiss him again.

"Wait. Wait, Ilya."

"What do you mean, wait?" Ilya goes for Shane's neck again, sucking into it, making a tight little seal with his lips that will probably leave a very satisfying bruise after. Shane groans and pushes on Ilya's chest, harder, so he releases from Shane's skin with a wet *pop*.

Ilya is so hard that he's dizzy, and now, suddenly, nervous. He can't think of any reason that Shane wouldn't want to fuck that isn't bad news. "What is it?"

"Just... just sit down, okay?" Shane says, and now Ilya really is worried, and Shane must see it, because he smiles and puts his hand up to cradle Ilya's jaw, like he means to reassure him.

“Please? I, um, need to give you something.”

“Yes, I think you do,” Ilya says, squeezing into Shane’s hips, trying one more hail mary to coax Shane into sex, to distract him from whatever this weirdly serious mood is. Shane just pushes Ilya gently toward the bar stools, and Ilya has to admit defeat, sliding into one with a theatrical groan so Shane knows how much he’s being put out.

Satisfied, Shane squats down by his bag, unzipping it to rummage through the contents while Ilya watches and talks himself down a little. Nothing bad is happening, just because Shane has something he wants to give Ilya, something that cannot wait, apparently. He just has to be patient. He has all day, and tonight, and all of tomorrow, too, to touch Shane. He can wait.

Shane straightens up and turns to him, and says, “I thought we should, uh, do it the right way.”

Shane is holding two little jewelry boxes in his hands, one of which Ilya knows, picked out, placed a ring into before he had it sent directly to Shane’s house. The other one is wrapped in a nice, pebbled leather, dyed a rich, dark green, and Ilya has never seen it before. But, of course, there is only one thing it could be.

It registers first in Ilya’s chest, under his ribs, when he understands what’s happening. Blooms into wonderful, excruciating pain, like an oddly happy wound has opened up in his chest, twisting and wringing his heart out. Ilya’s gaze is fixed on the two little boxes, held gently in Shane’s big hands, and he can feel heat spark at the corners of his eyes. The sting makes him blink furiously as it grows, as he watches Shane place the burgundy box down on the kitchen counter and slide it to Ilya, until it bumps against Ilya’s fingertips.

“Here,” Shane says quietly, “you’re supposed to put it on me.”

Ilya nods. His breath is caught somewhere at the bottom of his throat. Maybe that’s why his chest hurts, why his eyes burn. Maybe that’s why he can’t even speak, just solemnly open the little box with a low click and pluck the shining gold ring from its little satin nest.

Shane holds out his hand with a deadly serious expression, pretty eyebrows all pinched up where he is staring at the ring in Ilya’s fingers, bottom lip caught between his teeth. Ilya slides his palm under Shane’s, closes his fingers halfway around Shane’s wrist, holding him gently in place. With his other hand, he lines the ring up to Shane’s finger, and they both watch it go on, sliding up to meet his hand so easily, effortlessly, like it’s always been meant to go there.

Ilya looks up and Shane’s eyes are red and wet at the edges and swimming dangerously, and Shane is looking right at him, and Ilya gets trapped there for a moment, a tiny eternity, staring into those giant brown doe eyes that he loves so much, has never been able to defend himself against, not once in his life. So close and big and inviting. Ilya feels like he might just fall into them and never come out again.

Shane exhales out a shaky breath and takes another in. “Okay, now me,” he says.

Ilya watches Shane open his own little green box and pull out a very similar ring, gold against his fingertips, tiny inscription etched on the inside. He puts out his other hand, palm up, waiting for Ilya to slide his unadorned one over.

Ilya mirrors him, only now he can feel the smooth metal on Shane's finger when their hands meet, and it knocks the breath out of him. The air is charged, tense and close between them. Ilya watches Shane line the ring up against his finger, and feels strangely mute, feels like he's forgotten English, forgotten maybe even his own name. All he can do is watch.

Shane's brows knit together very adorably as he slides the ring carefully up Ilya's finger, like it's a delicate procedure, requiring all of his concentration. When it's fully seated, he takes Ilya's hand in his and laces their fingers together, gold to gold, and his other hand curls into Ilya's hair, and Shane pulls him close and kisses him. Just one kiss, just his soft lips pressed to Ilya's, but it might be his very favorite all the same.

Ilya's throat burns, like he hasn't taken a breath in years. His heartbeat is impossibly loud in his ears. Shane presses their foreheads together, eyes sliding closed, his thick lashes casting a shadow over his freckles. Ilya just looks and looks. He glances down between them, at their hands folded over each other, fingers intertwined, and finds he can't look away. He might never look at anything else for as long as he lives.

Such a simple thing, a little ring. How can it have this effect on him? How can it make him feel like he's almost floating out of his body, ecstatic and strangely heartbroken all at once?

He never wants to take it off, never wants Shane to have to, either, never have to hide them. Never have to explain. But of course, that isn't possible. They can't wear them while playing hockey. Probably not while working out, either. So that's half of their lives, right there, that they can't. And that is not even mentioning the press, and their teammates, who will question it. *What the fuck is that, Rozanov?* So, will they never get to wear them, except in secret, during the tiny moments between them? And then, long stretches where they can't, no matter how much they want to?

Fuck, it's just a reminder of all of it, all of the things in their way. That isn't how it's supposed to be. That isn't what they are meant to remind them of.

Shane must be thinking the same thing. "We... we can't wear them during games," he says, sounding for all the world like he might burst into tears. "They fuck up your grip."

"Okay."

Shane sniffs. "Hayden puts his in the locker when we play."

Ilya nods. That might be fine for Hayden, but it isn't enough for Ilya. He couldn't bear it, wearing his ring only to have to take it off, again and again, hide it in his bag or his locker or the glove compartment of his car. It isn't something to be ashamed of. It isn't something to sacrifice in the name of hockey, another thing of Shane's he can't have all the time.

He reaches around his neck and unclips the back of his chain. Shane watches him with wide eyes, watches him slide the ring off of his finger and drop it, glittering, onto the chain,

landing at the bottom where his mother's cross sits, enveloping it, so it comes to rest right along the inscription, right where it says *I love you forever*.

Ilya hopes his mother, if she is watching any of this, is happy that he has found someone to keep her company against his heart. He thinks she would be. Thinks that, if she had gotten the chance to, she might have loved Shane just as much. Maybe this way, she can.

"Oh fuck, I should have thought of that," Shane says wetly, watching Ilya clip the chain back around his neck. Shane reaches out and holds the ring and the cross gently in his hand, looking awed by it.

"Is okay. I will get you a necklace," Ilya says.

"You don't have to keep buying me jewelry."

"Ah, no. I will buy you all the jewelry in the world, I think."

They are all alone; there is no priest, no officiant, no witnesses to any of this, just Shane and Ilya, but Shane sways into him, meets Ilya's lips with his own, as if beckoned to, as if told *you may now kiss*. And it's enough. For now, it's enough. Some day, soon maybe, the entire world will know, and maybe things will be worse and maybe they will be better, but there is nothing else that Ilya needs right now but Shane, his forever, just like it says on the ring resting against Ilya's pounding heart.

"I love you," Ilya says, somehow for the first time that day. "Shane. I love you."

"I love you, too," Shane says, slipping their hands together, with his big, unguarded smile, the kind that delicately renders Ilya to pieces. "Come on. You can show me around, now."

Ilya leads Shane by the hand to his bedroom, which Shane remembers a little differently, blue sheets on the bed instead of white. Maybe there was different art on the walls, or different lamps on the bedside tables. Or maybe it's just that Shane was different, when he was last here. So scared, and worried, and miserable, and lying to everyone around him, himself most of all. It seems impossible to imagine, now, that he could have been so scared of *this*. That he could have kept all of his love for Ilya wrapped up so tightly inside of him, and not have it explode outwards in all directions from the pressure. That he could have lived like that, for so long, and not have it kill him.

He can't imagine it now, standing in the doorway with Ilya's hand in his, one finger absently smoothing over Shane's ring, like Ilya is checking that it's still there. He doesn't want to imagine it. Some other version of his life, where no volcano had ever erupted, where he might instead still be waiting around for some act of god to bring them together, desperate for any chance to talk to Ilya again. Desperate for the opportunity to tell him how he felt. Shane can't bear to look at it directly for too long, the possibility that his life could have turned out

any different than this, because he doesn't see how it wouldn't be worse. Sadder, lonelier. He has so much of Ilya now. He has all of his love and his blistering devotion, his promise of *forever*. Shane doesn't want to think of a life where he might have missed out on any of it. On all of it.

He wants, instead, to fall against Ilya, slot in against Ilya's broad chest, press all the way into him, let go of Ilya's hand only to take big fistfuls of his shirt instead and bring him as close as he possibly can, as close as the two of them can get. Let Ilya's huge arms wrap around him and sway him in place. Wants only to nose along Ilya's strong jawline and let his mouth drop open so Ilya can cover it with his, swoon into Ilya's tongue, slide his eyes shut, so he can just feel him everywhere.

Shane is standing in the bedroom, and Ilya is kissing him and running his hands under Shane's sweatshirt and across his back and pulling Shane so tight against him that Shane can barely breathe for it. And then, somehow, he is on the bed, and Ilya is bent over him, kissing him all over his face, the way that sometimes makes Shane feel like he could die from the scrutiny. Ilya, running his lips across the spread of his flushed cheeks, pressing kisses under his nose and into the divot between his eyebrows, like he's cataloguing all of the weird, embarrassing, unknown parts of him. Shane feels Ilya's hands sliding over his hips, up his stomach, and the cool breath of newly exposed skin after, and then he's naked except for his underwear, and he doesn't know how that's happened either.

Ilya's mouth drags along the line of his nose, the dip of his upper lip, and then Shane is only aware of Ilya's tongue sliding back behind his teeth, the way it searches his out, the way Shane's whole mouth gets wet as soon as Shane tastes him. How good the weight of Ilya's thigh feels working its way between Shane's legs, heavy like a promise against his hard dick, how the fabric of Ilya's sweats drags along the bare skin of Shane's thigh and lights it up like an electric current, makes his nerves fray and spark. All Shane can do is slip his hands under the waistband of Ilya's pants and grab handfuls of Ilya's perfect ass, pull him closer, jut his hips up against Ilya's leg and try to get more weight on his aching cock, more, more. If Ilya's tongue wasn't down his throat, he would cry and moan and beg for it.

Some pointlessly competitive part of him thinks, ruefully, that his stamina had actually gotten pretty good in Paris, with so much of Ilya's hands and mouth and cock to fuck him whenever he wanted, and how it's all fucked now. He could come like this, still in his underwear, humping Ilya's leg. And Ilya would kiss him and laugh and tease him and touch him, keep touching, until he was hard again, so maybe it would be okay, if he did. But Shane would rather come with Ilya's dick all the way inside of him, would rather see Ilya's eyes roll back and hear him mumble about how *tight you are, Shane, fuck, you're perfect. Made for me, made only for me.*

Ilya's hands pull painfully tight in his hair, curl all the way down to Shane's scalp. Shane wants him to dig in more, harder, until he doesn't think he could stand it. Wants Ilya to steer him around that way, to put Shane where he wants him, without even giving him the choice.

The new weight of Ilya's chain drags it down against Shane's clavicle when Ilya bends down to kiss him, cold against his flushed skin. It makes Shane feel fucking insane, makes his thoughts go to some animal place, his ring on Ilya's chain, claiming him. *Mine, my baby, my*

fucking man, forever, forever, forever. Makes him imagine wild, impossible scenarios in his head that sound so fucking good it's hard to remember why they can't happen. What if he just didn't get on his plane tomorrow? What if he just stayed here, forever? Ilya would allow it. Fuck, if Shane asked, Ilya would probably just come back to Montreal with him.

Just, how is he supposed to live any other way? How is he supposed to leave again?

Ilya rears back to shrug out of his shirt and work his pants off, and Shane could almost cry from it, from the lack of him, even for a moment. He feels crazy, to want him so much, to have missed him for so long that he can't even let him break apart to take off his clothes. The weight of him, again, when he sinks back down over Shane, lines their bodies up against one another's, is so wonderful, then, so comforting, that Shane does feel a little overcome with it, eyes flooding hot and pricking at the corners. And then Ilya is there, of course, kissing the threat of tears away, before Shane can even be embarrassed by how gone he is just from this, just their bodies against each other and Ilya's hot mouth and his searching, teasing, greedy hands.

It's just. It's that it's so much. It's always been so much. Ilya pressing down into all the places Shane wants to be held and touched and possessed. Ilya's hands on him, sinking so familiarly into Shane's body, running all over, squeezing into the muscle over his heart. It feels like Shane has just been waiting in stasis for weeks, waiting to feel them on him again, feel them right there, covering his heartbeat. It feels like things are finally the way they should be, again, finally in order. It feels like Shane has come home after a long time away.

And of course Ilya knows where to touch him, where to kiss him, knew before Shane did that there would be brimming tears in his eyes that he could kiss away. Ilya knows every part of him, maybe better than even Shane knows himself. If there was anything left for Ilya to learn about him, Shane would hand it over willingly. Ilya can have possession of all of these things, take them out of Shane's hands, keep them safe.

That's all Shane wants. All he wants, for the rest of his life. Ilya holding onto all the parts of him, every little good and terrible thing, loving him and wanting him and touching him like this. His love, his selfishness, his insatiability, his devotion, his fear and his bravery. All of the good and the bad, just for Ilya to own. All of him.

Ilya presses fingers against Shane's lips and Shane opens for them, wets them for Ilya to drop them down between Shane's legs and work him open. The burn and the stretch and the slide of them, finally, deep inside his body, so good, so fitting, so perfect. Ilya's mouth is hot and wet on Shane's neck, his Adam's apple, the line of his jaw— all the places on Shane's body that Ilya knows to tend to, places that he's been mapping out for Shane's entire life. Ilya's entire life, too, spent learning all the ways Shane aches to be touched, or maybe creating those aches in him in the first place, shaping Shane to be designed for only him, for his pleasure, his desire. Shane doesn't know any other way to be, because Ilya was always there. Shane has never known love or need except in the way Ilya has stoked it in him.

He was doomed from the beginning, cursed and blessed in equal measure to love no one else, his entire life, the way he has and will love Ilya Rozanov forever. *Forever.* That's what it means, forever, not just *from now on*. He loved Ilya before he even knew it. They found their

way to love, together, but it was already there, just waiting to be discovered by the two of them, waiting for them to finally name it, succumb to it, let it engulf the both of them.

He's so lucky, isn't he? Shane is so lucky. To love like this, to be loved this way. To be willing to tear the world apart for each other, carve a way through impossible circumstances, because this is worth all of it. It is. It's worth more than Montreal, or Boston, or Ottawa. It's worth more than even Paris. They are going to find a way through. That's what forever means, at least to Shane, and he fucking hopes that's what it means to Ilya, too.

Ilya opens him up so gently that it's almost too soft, like Shane is breakable, like Ilya believes he could hurt him. Like that could ever be possible, in this way or otherwise. Shane makes a keening noise in his throat for it, pushes impatiently into Ilya's hands, and Ilya usually laughs at Shane's eagerness or growls and presses him down into the mattress, but now he just kisses him everywhere again, all over his face, dipping back to his lips but then pressing kisses to his eyelids, his chin, the middle of Shane's eyebrows, the side of his nose, an examination that makes Shane feel like he couldn't possibly survive being loved so much, being known this way.

Shane curls his fingers around Ilya's hand where it is squeezing possessively into his chest. Ilya looks down between them, where Ilya's ring on Shane's finger is sitting, and when he looks back up, his eyes are soft and his lips are parted, breath thinned out like he just got off a shift, like they've already been fucking for hours, not barely started. Faraway, gone. Shane grabs his jaw with his hands and holds him there, so he'll stay with Shane, looking into his eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes, always so intense, lethal when they focus on him like this. Shane keeps him there, even though he feels like he's drowning under Ilya's gaze. Maybe he is. Maybe Ilya is drowning in turn. At least they are together.

Ilya doesn't look away, even as he pushes inside Shane's body. He goes slowly, by centimeters, letting the stretch drag out, on and on and on. His cock is so hot and full and heavy inside of him, burning him open. It's unbearable. Shane wants the full force of it, wants to feel him so deeply that it hurts to breathe, wants Ilya to bottom out in his ass and feel the sticky sweat of his thighs brushing against him, fucked in all the way, nowhere left to go. If Shane couldn't see how blown apart Ilya is above him, he would think he's being deliberately cruel, holding himself back on purpose, so he can hear Shane cry and plead for his cock, *come on, baby, fuck me, oh god, please, I need it*. So he can play sweet and whisper back, *Shane, of course, of course I will fuck you like you need, I know you, I know exactly what you want*.

But whatever Shane plans to say, it's lost when he reaches up for Ilya, and Ilya grabs his hand in the air and kisses the ring on Shane's finger, and Shane just stares at him and it all comes out of him, all at once, in a desperate flood, the words tripping carelessly over each other.

"I love you, Ilya. Oh fuck, I love you so much. I love you, I love you, I love you—"

And Ilya comes down over him and covers Shane's mouth with his own, and finally, *finally* gives him what he wants, fucks him powerfully, sends Shane scrambling for something to hold onto, gripping into the sheets and the pillows and succeeding only in tossing them around and messing up the bed. He feels split apart, and raw, and so good, so fucking good and perfect, Ilya's cock inside of him right where it should always be, nothing between them,

just fitting together exactly how they have always been meant to. Made for this, made for each other.

Ilya is close above him, so close, even when he breaks the kiss and drops his head down between his shoulders, his hair brushing against Shane's chin, trying to see where their bodies are fitting together, where his cock is disappearing inside of Shane. And then, his eyes are locked on Shane's again, pinning him down, taking him apart. Shane can see Ilya's chain and the ring dangling from it flying back and forth in the scant space between their chests, glittering in his peripheral vision, but he can't look away from Ilya's eyes, not until the end, not until he finds himself almost shocked by his orgasm, the way it comes all at once and out of nowhere, and his eyes slide shut of their own volition and he rears all the way up off the mattress and Ilya buries his face in Shane's neck and floods hot cum deep inside him. Something of Ilya's, too, for only Shane to keep.

After, Ilya gathers Shane crushingly tight against him, legs and arms wrapped around his body, weighing Shane down so he can barely breathe below him. Shane just focuses on Ilya's breathing, inhaling when Ilya breathes in and exhaling when Ilya breathes out, the same cadence, the same air, the same body and heart and mind. There are thoughts swirling at the periphery of his brain, but Shane can go easy and limp beneath Ilya for a while and think about nothing more than how good their bodies feel, slotted together like this, a single safe organism.

It is warm and humid in the room, and it is still early, and the sun is just starting to filter in through the windows, peeking around the gloom. There are some faraway sounds outside, the evidence of people going about their lives, tires on asphalt, doors opening or closing, a dog barking far off in the neighborhood. Ilya's breath is wet on his neck, and Shane can feel the tickle of his lashes when he blinks. Shane sinks his fingers further into the drenched curls at the back of Ilya's head, twisting little patterns in them, and tries to hold onto the quiet for as long as possible.

The first thought to break through is the same thought he's had almost non-stop since they left Paris. *How are we supposed to do this for two years?*

Shane is exasperated with himself for thinking this even when Ilya is right here, when he can feel him literally everywhere. Shane's cum and their shared sweat is drying between them in a way that will make it sticky and painful to even extricate themselves from each other later. Ilya is *right here*, and Shane can't help but think of the end, of the goodbye that's coming, and how hard it will be after.

And after that. After Ilya goes to Ottawa and he is *closer*, but not *close*. And there are only so many home games, and just as many away games, and weeks where Shane is away but Ilya is home, and Ilya is home but Shane is away, and fuck. *Fuck*.

How long will it be like that? Ten years? Fifteen? Shane could be playing until he's forty-five, if he is extremely lucky.

And it isn't going to work. It isn't going to work for him.

It was a nice idea, Ottawa and Montreal and being two hours apart, but he can't survive this, even if other people could. Shane is just too needy, or something else. Too dependent, too greedy. He just *needs* this more than other people. He knew it when he said it to Ilya, in front of Notre Dame, shivering and wet and miserable and so fucking in love that he didn't know how to make it make sense. He meant it: other people don't love each other the way Shane loves Ilya. No one except Ilya can understand just how much Shane needs him.

Shane needs *him*. Shane needs *so much*.

There is a secret list that has been growing in his mind since Paris, an ever-expanding catalog of things Shane needs. A big bed and a big house so that Ilya's broad body and even broader personality can fit inside of it with Shane. An excessively spacious garage for Ilya's stupid impractical cars, so they can collect dust for six months out of the year because they will inevitably live somewhere too snowy to drive them most of the time.

There is more than even that. He needs one, practical, normal car, so he can drive them together to practice every day, and the gym, and to home games. He needs their lockers side by side, in the same locker room, and every time he looks up from lacing his skates or taping his stick he needs to see Ilya's blue eyes looking back at him. When he sinks a goal, he needs Ilya to be the one scooping him up in his arms, yelling *fuck yes* in his ear. When he shoots across the ice and makes the opposing defensemen spin stupidly after the puck, he needs Ilya to be the one already lined up for him, knowing where to be, reading his mind.

And fuck, if he can have that, it almost doesn't matter where it is, which team, which city. He doesn't know why he thought it mattered so much. It's like this stupid fucking rivalry narrative still has some hold on him, that his first idea was *different teams, but closer*. What a dumb fucking idea.

Ilya can tell that Shane's mind is running grooves around itself, through whatever subliminal way Shane holds his body when he can't stop thinking about shit. He raises his head up from where he's been nestling it into Shane's neck, and looks down at him.

"Hey," he says, and presses a kiss to Shane's mouth. "You are okay?"

Shane pushes gently on Ilya's chest, because he can't talk if he can't breathe, even if he likes when he can't breathe because Ilya's whole body is pushing the breath out of his lungs. Ilya slides off to one side, still close, still pressed all the way up against Shane's leg and hip, but he's looking at Shane a little nervously. Shane pulls himself upright, reaches around for whatever pillows still remain on the bed so he can prop himself into a comfortable enough position while he talks.

He gets nervous too, then, looking at Ilya, at the way Ilya seems almost afraid to hear what Shane is gearing up to say, with this big production of sitting up and collecting himself. It would be nice if, for once, Shane could say what he wants to say in exactly the right way, a way that would immediately assuage all of Ilya's fears and have him understood exactly as he wants to be and have Ilya just say, *Oh, Shanya, of course, you are so right*.

But he fucks it up, naturally. He can tell by how Ilya's face falls and shutters as soon as he says it:

“I know I said Ottawa next year, but I just keep thinking about how many weeks we’ll still go without seeing each other, or seeing each other once a week at most. It just feels so hard. I don’t think I can do it.”

“Oh...” Ilya says slowly, overly casually, and Shane doesn’t know what stupid catastrophic thing he’s made Ilya believe he means by this, but he just keeps going, powering through his pitch, only more awkwardly now, more nervously, not sounding very convinced or convincing to his own ears.

“What if... what if I talk to management and see if you can come play for Montreal instead?”

Ilya stares at him for a couple of seconds before he laughs.

“Did I fuck you too hard? You have lost your mind, *lyubimyy*?”

“Fuck off,” Shane says. He feels a little desperate as he continues. “Listen, I know it’s fucking impossible, probably. We’d both need to take pay cuts for it, or we’d have to lose our entire second line for you, or something. It would look crazy. I don’t even know if the league would allow it. I know it’s not, like, *realistic*.”

Ilya cocks his head. “You would take a pay cut?”

“Of course.” Shane is a little annoyed that Ilya finds this to be such a surprise. Like the difference between Shane’s happiness and his abject misery is not worth a few million dollars.

Ilya does not look entirely convinced, which is understandable. The entire idea is a little insane, a little unbelievable: Ilya Rozanov, Montreal’s personal archenemy, putting on the blue and red.

But Shane has to keep going, has to get the rest of this maybe impossible idea out of his system, has to at least offer Ilya all of the other possibilities he’s thought of. Surely Ilya can believe in one of them.

“Or, if that doesn’t work, maybe I sign to Boston when my free agency comes up. Or I come to Ottawa, too. Even if we have to play triple shifts every game because they have no fucking bench.”

Ilya can’t help himself, it seems, when he laughs, “Maybe Ottawa would have shot at playoffs this century, if we were both on the team.”

“I’m serious,” Shane says. He’s starting to feel kind of stupid.

Ilya must see this, because he puts a hand out on Shane’s thigh and squeezes, and looks at him thoughtfully.

“I know, Shane.”

Shane sighs, looks up at the ceiling for some bravery. *Fuck it*, he thinks, and lets the rest of it just flow out of him.

“I just, I think I have to know that we’re going to be together, at the end of this. This is so fucking *hard*. I need to be with you all the time. If we’re still in different cities and we’re going on roadies half the year and we still can’t see each other, it’s going to feel too much like it does now. It’s going to feel like torture, every day that I can’t see you. I...”

Ilya’s hand squeezes down into his thigh again. When Shane looks back at him, Ilya’s expression is very focused, like he’s listening very intently to what Shane is saying. What he is trying his fucking hardest to say, at least. Ilya nods for him to continue.

Shane looks down at his hands, at the gold, shining ring that Ilya put on his finger. The one that Ilya sent him, in the fucking mail, like he couldn’t wait until they saw each other again for Shane to have it. Like Ilya was just as desperate for a way to prove that Shane belonged to him.

Ilya looked him in the eyes in their bedroom in Paris and asked Shane if he wanted to get married, right then and there. Ilya had not been afraid to tell him that he would give everything up, to keep Shane close. And somehow, Shane is only just now realizing it. That Ilya must have been waiting, all this time, for Shane to figure out that he can’t live with anything less than that, either.

He really ought to let him know, then.

“I want to buy a house with you. And see you when I wake up every morning. And spend every fucking summer in Paris, in an apartment that we own, that we’ll decorate exactly like the Airbnb. Because that’s my favorite place I’ve ever lived in my life. And I don’t think I care where we play as long as we can do that.”

Shane blinks hard, twirling and twirling his ring, and looks back to Ilya. Ilya looks like he might also cry, but is trying hard not to. And that is enough to make Shane’s voice crack over the last little part, which he says right into the big swimming oceans of Ilya’s blue eyes.

“Would you want that, too? Because that’s what I fucking want.”

Ilya takes a big, uneven breath. He pulls himself up from the bed, slides over Shane’s body, looming above him, filling Shane’s vision. His huge arms come down on either side of Shane’s head, closing him in so wonderfully, this tight little space that is just for them. Shane’s eyes flicker from Ilya’s eyes to his mouth, to the way it’s turned down at the corners, the way Ilya gets when he’s resolutely working against his emotions. Shane doesn’t even know why he is still bothering to do that, trying not to cry in front of Shane. It’s not like Shane is keeping his shit together any better.

Ilya says, “Yes. That is what I want, too.”

And that is that. The terms are accepted, sealed with a watery kiss that Ilya presses against Shane’s trembling lips. Ilya kisses him until they are both too breathless to continue, until Shane’s lips feel sore from the exertion, and then they just rest there together, Ilya’s cheek burning against his.

Eventually, Ilya pulls them both out of the bed and into the shower, and he runs his hands all over Shane's body when he cleans him off, and it ends up being a waste because they make it only as far as the bed again, Shane in Ilya's lap, Ilya's hands sunk into Shane's ass, his expression blown apart as Shane bounces on his dick. They stagger, laughing, back to the shower to try again, succeeding this time only because they are both starving and that manages to be distracting enough to finally lure them from the bedroom.

Ilya glues himself to Shane's side and puts his phone in Shane's hands with the DoorDash app already open to some Thai place, which Shane should not eat, for dietary reasons and sex reasons alike. He does his best with the menu anyway, too grateful and fucked-out to put up a fight. They end up in a pile on Ilya's couch while they wait, Ilya's phone in his hands, Shane's head comfortably heavy on Ilya's chest. Not so different, Shane thinks, from Paris, the two of them stretched out on that cream-colored couch, half-aware of the television. Just happy to lay tangled up in each other.

Ilya's arms are around Shane, locking him down against Ilya's chest, nestled right up along his cross, his ring. Ilya's phone is clutched in one hand, screen turned toward Shane, balanced precariously against one of Ilya's hipbones, so he can maneuver through it with only one thumb. He kisses the top of Shane's head, presses his lips to Shane's damp hair, humming a little satisfied noise into his scalp.

Shane watches him navigate through the million apps on his home screen until he finds his internet browser. And then, wordlessly, Shane watches Ilya pull up the listing of their Airbnb, which he already had open in one of his many, many tabs, and scroll through the calendar to July, and select two weeks, right in the middle of the offseason, that Ilya knows Shane has free. They circled them, together, on FaceTime, a couple of weeks ago. That was another promise, too.

Ilya hovers over the purchase page only for a second, like he's waiting to make sure Shane is watching him, before he presses the button to confirm the reservation. Shane watches all of it, and then he turns his head into Ilya's chest and kisses him there, above his heart, noses against the strong pulse pumping right below his cheek. He lets his lips rest against the rise of Ilya's chest, his face turned in against Ilya's body, his eyes sliding closed. It's so warm, and Ilya's heartbeat is so steady and close, and Shane is so happy, so in love, so fucking lucky.

Ilya puts his phone face down on the cushion beside him, so he can free his hands to run fingers through Shane's hair, over and over. Shane thinks he might not make it until the food arrives, might fall asleep just like this, petted into oblivion, when Ilya's deep voice rolls gently over him.

"You know, I hear Paris is a good place to have a wedding."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. Is known as a very romantic city."

"Huh. Is that so? Guess we better have Marie leave more champagne for us, then."

"Yes. Maybe several cases."

“...Would it be legal?”

“The champagne?”

“The wedding.”

“Ah.” Ilya’s fingers are a warm weight against Shane’s scalp, and there is no way Shane is going to stay awake this way. “Probably not. Is foreign country, so.”

“Hm,” Shane says, pressing his lips against Ilya’s body again. Again. Barely a kiss, just wanting to touch him, always. “So we’ll have to do it again in Canada, too. To make it really stick.”

“Yes. And again in Massachusetts. Just for, ah. Posterity.”

“For posterity,” Shane says, makes the ‘p’ pop like it sounds when Ilya says it. “Let’s do it. All of it.”

Ilya finds Shane’s hand, brings it to his lips, kisses each of his fingers. Lingers a moment longer on the ring, brushing his lips over it again and again.

“Okay.”

Maybe Shane falls asleep then, under Ilya’s strong fingers, lulled under by the beating of his heart. Maybe he just floats, in and out, along the feeling of Ilya wrapped all around him, and loses track of the time. There is very little difference between those two. His dreams would be exactly like this, surrounded everywhere by Ilya, by his even breathing and warm skin and fingers carding through Shane’s hair. It’s hard to tell, then, if he is awake or not, and it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that they are together, and that Shane doesn’t even need to reach out to find him, because Ilya is already there, already touching him, already as close as it is possible for him to be.

And there is something about it, the way it makes Shane feel, when the two of them are together like this. Unbreakable, invincible. Like there isn’t anything that can stand in their way. The world doesn’t work like that, probably, and when Ilya is far away, sometimes Shane feels like he is succumbing to all of the worries of just how many things can and do stand in their way. But not right now, with Ilya everywhere, filling his senses. Right now, all of his wildest dreams, his half-constructed plans, feel close enough to reach out and take.

And yeah, maybe it is a little *improbable*, this plan of theirs, for a future of only this. Or maybe it is a lot improbable. Very much so. Maybe it will turn out to be the hardest thing they’ve ever tried to do, but. But, who gives a shit. Shane is going to do it, anyway. They are going to make it happen.

Improbable is not *impossible*, not even close. After all, Paris was improbable, once. Maybe Paris had been a miracle, but then, there are always miracles. There are always volcanoes, affording them second chances.

So maybe it will take three weddings, and two hefty pay cuts, and a very savvy and ruthless agent to navigate the minutia of it all. Maybe Shane will call his mom tonight and ask her to cancel every single brand event and advertising shoot for the rest of the season, so he can soak up every little second of Ilya's time that he can until they are in the same city again. Maybe Shane will walk into his locker room on Thursday afternoon and tell everyone on his team that he is in love with Ilya Rozanov and just, like, sees what happens after that.

Today, though, Shane is just going to lie on Ilya's couch, with Ilya's fingers in his hair and his strong perfect heart beating its cherished, hypnotic rhythm against his ear, and he's going to let his mind sink into blissful static and let this moment stretch out as long as the universe and the DoorDash driver's GPS will let him.

Ilya is here, and so Shane is exactly where he wants to be.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU so much for coming along on this journey with the boys. I am honestly so overwhelmed by the response this fic has received over the last four months (I believe I started it in March? 🤔) Thank you so much for recommending it and sending it around, and for all of your comments, and kudos, and for loving it! I am still kind of in shock at the reception it's had, to be honest, haha. I hope this very long (16k! The longest by far!) chapter was what you hoped for! this is the longest piece of fiction I have ever tried to write, by FAR, and wow, it was really an undertaking, but you guys were honestly so supportive the whole way, that it was really a worthwhile endeavor. Thank you for popping into tumblr for encouragement, as well. Just, thanks <3 Fuck the haters, this is an amazing fandom.

I did not originally intend to write a sequel to this fic, mostly because I didn't want to do the research necessary to actually figure out how to wrangle two superstar hockey legends onto a single team, but I keep thinking about this Paris wedding of theirs, so watch this space, I guess? I want them to get everything they deserve, these two codependent loverboy angels 🥺

As always, come find me on tumblr, [@scacao-blog](https://www.tumblr.com/scacao-blog).

Works inspired by this one

[Book Cover: Closer to where you are \(is where I must be\) by sistercacao](#) by Anonymous

[Cover Art: Closer To Where You Are Is Where I Must Be](#) by [PsychoFig](#)

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