

One Escape to I Do

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/83426591) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/83426591>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Arranged Marriage , Mutual Pining , Angst , Friends to Enemies to Lovers , Childhood Friends , Jealousy , Jealous Shane Hollander , Jealous Ilya Rozanov , Kinda toxic obsession , Idiots in Love , Forced Proximity , Toxic love
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Gwen's heated rivalry fics
Collections:	Anonymous
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-05 Completed: 2026-05-30 Words: 40,026 Chapters: 6/6

One Escape to I Do

by Anonymous

Summary

Shane flees to the cottage four hours before his marriage to his biggest hater, Ilya Rozanov. He doesn't expect to find Ilya, who thought of jilting him first, at his destination.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

Now

Shane Hollander has known two truths since he was old enough to retain memories.

1. He would inherit his family's multimillion-dollar company.
2. He would marry the second son of the Rozanovs to bind their families' tricennium-old alliance.

Thirty years ago, long before Shane was conceived, Rozanov Fitness and The Hollander, two major rival sports-wear brands, merged to form Hollanov Gears in a last-ditch attempt to redeem their crippling financial predicaments. Irrespective of their growing success and reputation in the sports industry, the two families had reservations about one another.

To overcome this concern, both sides agreed to merge in holy matrimony. It was a great decision barring the slight inconvenience of the immediate heirs already having wives. After more brainstorming, it was finalized that their children, regardless of gender will have to inherit not only their wealth but also their marital obligations.

And just like that, it was written in the stars; Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander would tie the knot at twenty-five years old.

Then came another problem, one which Shane couldn't look past. Ilya Rozanov despised him. He tried, heaven knows he tried everything within his power to change Ilya's position but failed.

That brings him to why he is currently pacing back and forth in his suite, with merely four hours to his wedding. His tuxedo jacket is hanging on his arm and his shiny black Louboutins are capsized at the foot of his enormous bed. He paces the length of the room one more time before deciding he doesn't need to hold on to his jacket either. It falls to the carpeted floor with a thud.

Up until ten minutes ago, he thought he could marry Ilya Rozanov and fulfill his familial obligations. But as the seconds drew closer to minutes, and then to the moment he would sign his freedom away to Ilya, his anxiety deepened and veered him off the path of responsibility he had walked all his life.

He cannot seem to remember all the reasons he listed in his binder that justified this union. Is saving his family worth a lifetime of suffering? His incessant pacing only quickens his breath. He hooks an index finger into his bowtie and pulls it loose, sucking in a lungful of air.

Outside, the Rozanov villa is teeming with wedding planners making last-minute touches to decorations, august guests from far and near, and possibly all of the Canadian media. The Hollanov union has been the topic of conversation since it was announced at a presser a year ago. It generated a buzz of about five hundred thousand tweets. ***Shane Hollander, Rose***

Landry's ex and media sweetheart, is set to tie the knot with Notorious Playboy, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov. News like that was bound to make headlines.

Following the announcement, Hollanov Gears was banned from the Russian market but that only strengthened support for the brand from allies all over the world, staking more on the union than before.

Shane hoped the interest in his and Ilya's relationship would dwindle with time but it only grew with a community of online people pushing a narrative of how they fell in love despite the age-long feud between their families.

They were right about the feud. Just wrong about who it involved.

"I don't want to do this," Shane laments to his two best friends who have been watching him pace a hole through the carpet.

"Then don't." Hayden, who has never been a fan of Rozanov, says.

"Shit, what is wrong with me? I'm supposed to be ready. I've prepared my entire life for this."

"Just say the word, Shane." Rose chimes in from the windowsill. Her lace dress replicates the curtains billowing in the breeze. It's a nice day out. It could be a nice day to get married or a nice day to jilt one's asshole fiancé.

Shane decides before he can walk it back. "I don't want to get married."

His best friends jump to their feet instantly. Hayden grabs the bag Shane brought with him and shoves the few items lying about back inside. Rose fishes her car keys out of her purse and flings them at Shane. He fumbles with the air but successfully snags it.

"Rose, I'm desperate but not enough to drive your car." It's an old clunky thing that Rose uses when she doesn't want to be perceived by the public.

"Not the time to be a rich snob."

"Your car doesn't even start sometimes!"

"Not if you are mean to her. Treat her with love and she'll take care of you."

"It stopped in the middle of the highway two months ago." Shane shakes his head. "Forget it. This was a bad idea in the first place. I can't run away. Where would I go? They will find me before I leave the airport."

"The secret's to hide in plain sight." Hayden offers.

"Like my condo?"

"No, Shane. Think of somewhere close but not too close. Somewhere your parents wouldn't even begin to think of."

Only one place comes to mind. A month ago, Shane's parents summoned him to their home and presented him with an early wedding gift; the keys to a cottage in Ottawa. When Shane was younger, he spent some summers at his family's cottage. It was some of his freest moments. Now, faced with the choice of bondage and freedom, he couldn't conceive a better place to escape to.

"The cottage." He dashes for his toiletries bag and rips the zip open. Exhales when he finds a shiny set of keys resting at the bottom. With renewed gusto, he pivots to his friends, the key chain hanging off a finger. "I'm going to the cottage."

"Yeah let's get moving." Rose musses up his hair and pulls a cap over it. She digs through her purse for sunglasses and fits them over his eyes. "This is for when you stop for groceries," Rose says, an illustration of her forward thinking. "You'll need enough to tide you over for two weeks."

"Two weeks? I was thinking maybe... one day?"

"Shane, I love you but you're way too naive. You really think they wouldn't marry you off tomorrow? Hide away until the flowers wilt and the cake ferments." Rose's eyes soften. "If they insist on this after two weeks, we will find a way. I won't watch you sign your life off to a man you can't stand."

"It's not me. It's—," Shane struggles to find a less pitiful way to say it. "It's him. He can't stand me."

"And now he doesn't get to try. Good luck, Shane."

"Call us when you get there," Hayden adds. "We'll stay here and hold down the fort."

They wrap him in a group hug and nudge him toward the door. Shane takes a deep breath and turns the handle.

**

Two and a half hours later find Shane on a narrow tarred road, fifteen minutes away from the cottage. His nerves are yet to settle despite trying every breathing exercise in the books.

His rebellion against his disposition to do the honorable thing provokes a dissonance that wreaks havoc on his nervous system. He migrates between heart palpitations, nausea, and the worst, a ringing in his ear that spots his vision every other second.

A sudden jerk makes him lose control of the wheel momentarily. He narrowly saves the car from veering off the road and slams on the brakes. The sputtering from the engine reduces to a whistle and then a tired choking sound before it goes completely still.

Shane lets out a barrage of curses as he slips out of the car. He shouldn't have trusted Rose with anything concerning this car. He pops the hood open and stands akimbo as he peeks at the junk that controls the car. None of it makes sense to him. He slams it shut and grabs his phone to call an expert, annoyed to see zero signal bars.

He holds his phone at several angles, jumps up and down, and walks a couple of steps back, without success.

Exhausted, he stops to take in his surroundings. The sun is hidden behind a canopy of trees. It peeks through occasionally as the wind ruffles the leaves, refusing to be occluded. This falls at the bottom of the list of bad places to be stranded. Shane looks at his phone, relieved to find Google Maps is still functioning.

It takes some effort but he hefts his three grocery bags, pops the telescopic handle of his valise, and commences the trek to the cottage.

The cottage stands in the middle of a large clearing blanketed with carpet grass. It is a breathtaking structure of charred wood and tall glass walls. Not far away, sunlight twinkles over a still lake.

Shane ascends the short steps that lead to the entrance. Gets his keys out of his pocket after some struggling. He goes to insert it in the lock and pauses when the door nudges open with little effort. Warning bells go off in his head. There's an intruder in the cottage.

"Hello?" He calls against better judgment. A wise person would have retracted his steps or called the fucking cops. Shane is not always wise. Running away from his wedding to be murdered in the woods is a case in point.

There's a clattering sound from inside followed by a grunt. Shane drops his bags, assuming a fighting stance. A figure appears in the distance and begins its approach. Shane's fisted hands collapse to his side and his volatile pulse further quickens even before the figure takes shape.

He would recognize the shape of him blindfolded.

"What the fuck!?" Ilya Rozanov appears before him, separated only by a glass wall. His sweatpants ride low on his hips and a lampstand fashioned as a weapon dangles in his left fist.

"Yeah," Shane mumbles, his throat tightening. "What the fuck?"

**

Then

Nine years old

Shane peeks through the curtains. He taps a foot against the floorboards and bites his lips red as adults file out of the vehicle. He notices Sergei first, the Rozanovs' personal lawyer. Mr. Rozanov follows. He has a name but Shane for the life of him can never memorize it so he refers to him as 'the scary one' in his head. The name befits the stout, bald man with eyes as blue and cold as death.

The next one out of the car is Alexei. Shane can smell his arrogance from a distance. He is just four years older than Shane but acts like a grown-up.

Irina steps out of the car with grace. She's slender and tall and always smells nice. Her hair is the color of the sun and her eyes are a soft blue. Shane likes her because she smiles at him and doesn't pretend he's invisible.

After Irina disappears into the house, Shane's feet start bouncing faster. Ilya, the second son of the Rozanovs, is the best part of these meetings. He was always the first to get out of the car, speeding toward the stairs to Shane. Shane drops his head, disappointed. Ilya is not coming today.

The first time they met, Shane was only eight, neglected and wandering the quiet halls of their mansion when a blond boy popped out of nowhere and started following him around. Shane was neither good at making friends nor talking to people but the boy didn't seem to want to make conversation. He was content to sit quietly with Shane.

He brought the boy to his bedroom and wordlessly laid out all his cool toys. He got the impression that the boy did not care much about them but he smiled when Shane smiled and laughed when he laughed.

Shane decided that he was going to keep him and make him happy. He didn't make fun of Shane, or smell funny like the other boys at school, and his eyes were so big and pretty like the blue necklace mom wore. They were somehow larger while he watched Shane with rapt attention which made every crypt and freckle in them visible.

To make his new companion feel more at home, Shane decided to make room for him in his wardrobe. He was shifting his socks to one side of the drawer when his door swung open.

A wide-eyed woman barged in looking around frantically. She choked on a sob when her eyes found the boy and fell to her knees to wrap him in her arms.

"Ilyusha." Her voice trembled as she spoke in a language Shane couldn't understand no matter how much he strained his ears. It was quite frustrating. The boy whom Shane thought couldn't speak, said something back, eyes pooling. The lady pressed a kiss to his forehead and tickled his side. The boy dissolved into laughter.

Before she would take the boy's hand and lead him away, she turned soft eyes to Shane and smiled. "Hello Shane, I am Irina. Nice to meet you."

"Hi." Shane's voice is small. He felt a blush rising to his cheeks.

"You have met my son, Ilyusha. He said you took care of him."

"I did." Shane felt proud.

"Thank you. I would like to sit and talk but we are running out of time. Next time?"

"Okay." His voice came out squeaky again.

Irina smiled, gave a small nod to Mom who had rushed in with her, and left. Mom then told him about the Rozanovs. "They are... good friends from Russia," she said. "It's important that we are nice to them. We will see them four times every year."

“Will he come every time?”

Mom did not ask who. She smiled warmly. “Yes, love. He will come too.”

She was right. Ilya, the blue-eyed boy, visited again in the spring. He said a few words this time like Shanya, hello, awesome, and goodbye. Shane and his family flew to Russia to see the Rozanovs in the summer. Ilya’s hair was lighter and looked like dry wheat in the sun rays. He proudly showed off all the new words he learned, grinning when Shane patted his head like Mom did whenever she was proud of him. Shane cried when they had to leave the Rozanovs’ house for their hotel room. He cried so hard he developed a fever.

When they returned to Russia during the fall, Ilya bounded down their perron steps even before the Hollander’s car stopped. Shane, just as eager, hopped out and snatched Ilya’s wrist up, laughing as they flew up the steps Ilya had just descended.

Ilya learned only one new word; freckles. He said it so much that Shane had to ban him from using it. Shane made a personal pact not to cry but when their car drove off the Rozanovs’ property, he burst into big fat tears.

Now, a few months later, Shane starts to turn away from the window when another head sticks out of the vehicle. Ilya looks taller than Shane last saw him. His hair is darker and streaked with gold. And his eyes, when he lifts them and stares right at where Shane is hiding behind the curtains, are still a brilliant shade of blue.

Shane takes the stairs two at a time. He is only halfway down when Ilya turns the corner and catches up to him. They crush into each other, panting breathlessly.

“Hello Shanya,” Ilya says, pulling away.

“Ilya.”

“You missed me?”

“You wish.”

“You are really bad liar,” he smirks. “I saw you from car. Watching and waiting. About to cry.”

“I was not about to cry!” He protests. But he thinks if Ilya didn’t come, he might really have cried.

“Is okay to cry.”

“Shut up, Ilya.” Shane takes Ilya’s wrist and begins herding him up the stairs, towards the music room at the end of the hall, which nobody ever uses. He has so much to tell him. Four months’ worth of stories.

Behind the door of the music room, with an assortment of Canadian snacks surrounding them, Shane tells Ilya he’s taking boxing classes now but might quit because he really doesn’t

like it when they hit him. Ilya shares his new interest in fast cars. He likes the sounds they make.

“Small but— err big?”

“Powerful?”

“Da, powerful.”

He tells Shane about his parents. His Papa yells so much lately. And his Mama cries a lot. He hides in Irina’s library when it gets too loud.

“You could live here with me.”

Ilya shakes his head. “No, that is not good. Err I mean, Papa will say no.”

“Impossible?”

“Yes, impossible. But maybe in... when we grow up. It will be not impossible.”

“Possible.”

“Too much English, Shanya. My head—,” he makes an explosion sound with his lips.

“Okay, no more English.”

This time, when Ilya leaves, Shane only cries a little. Not enough to induce a fever.

**

Ten years old

As Ilya’s English improves, the more talkative he gets. He prattles on about sports cars and skating with Irina who was a former figure skater. After skating, Irina takes him to a bakery near the skating rink to get Ilya’s favorite dessert, *syrniki*.

He talks about summers. Swimming alone at the pool because Alexei refuses to play with him, and getting so sunburned, Irina lathers aloe on his skin. When it’s not too hot, he watches butterflies in the family garden. He loves butterflies, especially the blue ones. Sometimes, he sneaks off to play catch with the neighbor’s dog because Papa won’t get him a pet.

“Papa hates bad kids. I am bad and lazy. He disciplines me. But is okay, I get hugs from puppy.” He grins widely and unapologetically.

Ilya addresses suffering with a smile on his face. It’s not easy to quickly move past it like Ilya does. “I’m sorry,” says Shane.

“Do not say sorry for puppy hug.”

“For discipline.”

“Ah, that can be bad sometimes.”

Shane hugs him. He wishes hugs could transfer emotions so he could share some happiness with Ilya and take away his sadness. He wants to be Ilya’s best friend and make him the happiest person in the world.

Everyone at school has a best friend. He can’t tell if his relationship with Ilya qualifies because they only meet four times a year. Nonetheless, Ilya is all Shane thinks about. He has actively stopped trying to make friends in his school. The calendar in his room has four dates circled in red ink, counting the days until they meet.

Ilya is Shane’s only friend but he doesn’t know if he’s Ilya’s only friend. He hopes he is. He is certain nobody else could make Ilya as happy as he does. Moreover, he would be Ilya’s husband in the future. It would be pointless to have friends who are not his husband.

**

Eleven years old

Shane’s birthday falls on the Rozanovs’ second visit to Canada. Irina does not join the esteemed entourage.

“Mama is not well,” Ilya says when Shane asks.

In the music room, Ilya belts out ‘Happy Birthday’ in Russian while smashing random keys on the piano. It is simultaneously the worst and the best thing Shane has ever heard. He laughs until his tummy hurts. He only ever laughs this hard with Ilya.

Ilya gives him a birthday present. It’s a Ferrari model. He says it reminds him of Shane. “Small but powerful.”

“I’m not small! I’m bigger than all the boys in my class. You’re just freakishly big.”

“Freakishly.” Ilya scrunches up his nose. “Is funny word.”

“It means way too much of something.”

He nods seriously. “So you are freakishly small but powerful.”

“Ughhh shut uppppp.”

Shane has a whole plan to ask Ilya to be his best and only friend. He practiced his speech several times, in different voices and with various facial expressions. First, he will ask if Ilya has other friends. Ilya will obviously say no. Shane will then confess that he also has no other friends.

He’ll then list all his best qualities, like how he makes the best strawberry smoothies, and ask Ilya if he wants to be best friends. Yuna promised him a phone for his birthday this year. When Ilya says yes, Shane will give Ilya his number so he can call when he gets his phone too.

“So,” Shane starts while they are bent over a large slice of chocolate cake. He draws patterns with his fork in the icing smeared over the edge of the plate. He’s not a big fan of cake but Ilya is. “Kind of lame to have to have only one friend, right?” Ilya looks up from the cake, his eyebrows arching high. It’s not what Shane practiced. He wants to walk it back. “I mean, only losers have one friend, right?” He digs himself deeper. He clears his throat and abandons the speech, shooting straight. “I— uh, do you have any friends?”

Ilya doesn’t respond. His confused gaze scans Shane’s face. He’s taking too long to respond. Shane panics. “I make a mean strawberry smoothie,” he blurts.

“I have a friend,” Ilya says concurrently.

Shane’s heart sinks. Maybe if Ilya knew what else he could offer. “My smoothies make people happy. I’ll make you happy,” he adds weakly. A fire starts in his belly and spreads to his chest. It hurts worse than when he caught a stomach bug and was bedridden for a week.

“Her name is Svetlana.”

“A girl?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s nice?”

“Her father is friend of Papa. She lived in America.”

“Oh,” Shane says again. He bites the inside of his cheek and forces a smile. “That’s nice.”

“She is pretty. Like butterfly.”

“You like butterflies.”

“Yes.”

“That’s nice,” Shane repeats with a grimace. He wishes he had more words.

His mind paints a vivid picture of Ilya and Svetlana together, unencumbered by time constraints. Will they swim or play with the neighbor's dog together in the summer? Will they tend the garden together? Build model cars on Ilya’s bedroom floor? Has Ilya's English improved significantly because of her?

Shane bows his head to hide his wobbly lips from Ilya. Usually, breathing in and out stops his tears. The method fails him today. Still hiding his face, he scrambles to his feet and flees the music room.

He locks himself in his bedroom until the Rozanovs leave. Then he cries and makes a birthday wish for Svetlana to disappear from the surface of the planet.

They fly to Russia in the summer.

Shane is excited to see Ilya. He misses him so much. On the other hand, he's dreading it, afraid Ilya would have his friend, Svetlana with him.

He's relieved when only the Rozanovs, sans Irina, meet them at the entrance. Ilya does not rush toward Shane like he used to. He hardly looks at Shane at all.

After sharing courtesies, Shane and Ilya are left alone while the adults converge on the meeting room. Ilya stands facing away from Shane. The silence builds on. Shane knows he should say something. Perhaps apologize for his hissy fit the last time they were together.

That Ilya is Shane's only and best friend does not require Ilya to make the same commitment. Shane decides he doesn't have to be Ilya's only friend to make him happy. He will settle for being just one of his friends— if Ilya will take him. But before Shane can speak, Ilya huffs in annoyance and walks out on him.

Shane is left in the middle of the hallway all alone. He fiddles with his thumbs, nibbling the inside of his mouth until it sores.

He stands there for a long time before finding an empty room to sit quietly in and pray his heartburn away.

**

Twelve years old

Irina passes on a Thursday evening.

Shane finds out on Friday morning. ***Breaking: Irina Rozanov found dead in her Moscow mansion. More to follow***

Shane first read about Ilya in the tabloids purely by accident. His Google homepage thought he should know more about the Hollanov partnership and what it could mean for the business of sports in the coming years. He only opened the article because the thumbnail was a family photo of the Rozanovs.

Shane did not have any pictures of Ilya. He thought he could save it and crop Ilya's family out. However, when he opened the article, he was directed to a different one written purely in Russian.

He quickly translated it. '***Exclusive look into Ilya Rozanov's 11th birthday party***'. There were numerous photos of Ilya and Shane ravenously saved all but one, in which Ilya was captured smiling at a red-haired girl.

Thenceforth, Shane looked up news on Ilya every morning. It was invasive and inappropriate but he justified his actions with one reason. He missed Ilya. They hadn't spoken since Shane's birthday incident.

When the Rozanovs came around in April, Ilya stuck to his brother's side and barely spared Shane a glance. Ilya was not a big fan of his brother. If he would rather spend time with him, it wasn't hard to deduce how much Ilya hated Shane.

So as a substitute for Ilya's attention, Shane scavenges Russian tabloids like a vulture.

Now, Shane stares at the headline until the page blurs. He didn't talk to Irina much. She was a woman of few words— she smiled at Shane to welcome him and wave him bye— but he knew her.

He spent hours skating on the ice with her. He ate syrniki at a small bakery with her. He can almost hear the song she hums when she makes *okroshka* for her sick son.

Ilya made sure he had memories to mourn.

**

It is cold on the day Irina is put in the ground. How fitting that the sun hides her face for such a tragedy. Rain soaks the ground and splashes dirt on their expensive shoes and the hem of their pants.

The obsequies are conducted purely in Russian but grief is uniform in every language. It reveals itself in the black of their clothes and the downturn of their lips. In the shoulders that shake. In the eyes that weep. And the voices that wail.

Grigori, who often seemed mightier than the world, looks like he could be trampled under a toddler's foot. He seems to have aged several years, his hair greyer and his back more bent.

Alexei looks his age for once. Though he pretends to be fine, his high shoulders have lowered minutely.

Ilyusha wears his heart on his sleeve. He'd choose to hide it if he could, Shane knows, but his despair is the loudest on the field. He stands just a step away from Shane and his family, swaddled in clothes that were definitely picked up in a rush. What is the appropriate attire for burying a parent? Why should a twelve-year-old bury his mother?

**

The Rozanovs host Shane and his family at the left wing of their mansion. The dinner table is as silent as the cemetery. Nobody really eats. Shane keeps his eyes on Ilya the entire time. Somewhere along the way, a girl appears from nowhere and sticks to his side. Shane recognizes her by her hair. She's even prettier in person. Ilya's butterfly. She holds Ilya's hand the way Shane wants to. She strokes his back over his too-big jacket and whispers platitudes.

Shane stares until the imagery burns behind his eyelids. It haunts him at night, flashes of gold and auburn hair in his dreams. He wakes up at two in the morning and can't go back to sleep. Too antsy to stay still, he throws a robe over his pajamas and walks down the lonely halls to

the right wing of the house where the Rozanovs live. He takes the stairs to Irina's library, one of the two places he's familiar with.

It was his second-favorite place to be after Ilya's bedroom. Sometimes they sat on the balcony and chatted while watching clouds. On rare occasions, Ilya asked Shane to read out English books to him and laughed at words he thought sounded funny. Sometimes, they just lie in the stillness, enjoying each other's space. Shane chases the memory.

The library is not as empty as he thought it would be. Ilya is curled up on the single three-seater couch squeezed between a desk and a shelf. He stirs at the intrusion, only jerking back slightly when he sees that it's Shane.

"Sorry, I couldn't sleep." Shane feels the need to explain. "I didn't know you were here. If I did, I wouldn't have bothered you." Ilya's silence triggers a ramble. "My condolences by the way. I was going to call you but I didn't have your number and you're not on social media. I checked. N-not in a stalkerish way. I'm not a stalker. I didn't want to ask my parents then they'd have to ask your dad and it would become a whole thing. I just— I wanted to say sorry. I know how much she means to you. Sorry— meant. I just— sorry?"

Ilya stares at him for a moment and then breaks into laughter. Shane stands woodenly and quite baffled as he laughs to his fill. "Oh my God, Hollander. You have not changed."

Was he supposed to? He would've tried if he knew. "Sorry."

"You will stand there all night?"

"What? Oh." He steps away from the door and perches beside Ilya. They are on opposite ends of the couch with a cushion between them and yet, it's the closest they've been in months. They exist together in silence. Ilya's gaze tingles the side of Shane's face but he doesn't turn to meet them.

More silence follows. Then Ilya says softly, "I did not think you would come."

Shane frowns, finally meeting his eyes. Ilya is still smiling but his eyes are sad. "Why would you think that?"

"I thought you changed. How you say— uh grew out of me?"

"I didn't."

"So you don't have a million new friends?"

"That would be you," Shane says, annoyance souring his mood. "I don't have a million other friends." He feels ashamed for some reason when he adds, "It's just you. Was just you."

Ilya brightens at Shane's confession. He sidles up to Shane until the side of their legs touch. "So you are loser?"

Shane frowns. He's more embarrassed than angry. "I guess I am."

“Nooo Shanya,” Ilya groans like he didn’t suggest it. “Do not talk about yourself like that. You are very boring but you are not loser.”

“Shut up, Ilya.”

“Hmm just because you blush.”

“I’m not blushing.” He is. He can feel the heat spreading to his cheeks and ears.

Ilya searches his face, smiling. Then he shifts even closer and lays his head on Shane’s shoulder. Something releases in Shane’s chest. The knot twisting in his stomach for months gives. Shane leans back to make Ilya comfortable. Then gently, he cards his fingers through his golden curls.

“I’m sorry about your Mama.”

“Hmm.”

“And I’m sorry for running away.”

“Hmm.”

Shane swallows. “I-I know you have a friend now but I think you should make me your best friend. I make the meanest strawberry smoothie and I can make you happy, I think. Will you be my best friend?”

“You always have been, Shanya.”

**

Sixteen years old

Ilya starts referring to Shane as his husband. But there are so many things Ilya starts at sixteen. One is wearing a gold crucifix around his neck in remembrance of Irina. He now talks about kissing girls, and the smell of nicotine clings to his clothes.

If you asked Shane, Ilya should not be kissing girls or anyone else since they are contractually engaged to be married but he doesn’t say this out loud. Ilya would roll his eyes and call him boring. He however makes sure Ilya knows how much he hates smoking.

“I don’t want you near me. You stink of cigarettes.”

“Shanya, I had just one.” He whines, chasing Shane around the library. Ilya eventually catches up to him, caging him against a shelf and pressing his entire weight into him. “I got you,” he grins, minty breath fanning Shane’s lips.

Shane stares at his lips for a moment. He bites his own and looks back at Ilya’s eyes.

“Smoking is bad for you.”

“We are not married yet but you talk talk.”

“Nag.”

“Da that, you nag too much.”

“I just want you to live long enough to actually get married,” Shane teases.

“Ugh fine. I will stop. Happy?”

“Yes.”

“Now give me hug, pleeeaseeeee. I have missed you.”

At seven, Shane was told in a few words that when he was old enough, he would marry somebody called Ilya Rozanov. He didn't know what that meant at the time. At ten, he figured out what was being asked of him to some extent.

Marriage: the state of being united as spouses in a contractual relationship recognized by law.

Spouse: a partner in marriage. Specifically a husband and wife.

Shane could imagine a much worse fate than being stuck with his best friend for the rest of his life. He liked spending time with Ilya. If they got married, they wouldn't have to rely on quarterly visits a year. They'd always be together. Sleep in the same room like mom and dad and maybe kiss each other.

At twelve, with Ilya in his arms on a library couch, mourning Irina together, he understood marriage could mean a little more than the dictionary definition.

Now at sixteen, Shane's stance on marrying his best friend hasn't changed. He's just a little more aware of it because it's all they talk about in meetings. They get constant briefings on how to conduct themselves in public and stay out of negative press. Grigori repeats the latter one while staring at Ilya.

Ilya nods obediently. He's different around his father. Stripped off his usual light. Whenever that happens, Shane recalls ten-year-old Ilya's words. “Papa disciplines me.”

When they manage to escape the adults, Ilya teases him. He calls Shane his husband and laughs heartily when Shane blushes and tells him to fuck off.

In Russia, they hide away in Irina's library and talk about what they would do once they were twenty-five, married, and free from their parents.

“Travel the world, probably,” Ilya says. “Many places to see.”

“Will you bring me with you?”

Ilya looks at him like he's stupid for asking. “Will I bring my pretty husband with me?”

“Fuck off!”

Ilya only laughs harder. “Yes, Shanya. I will bring you with me.”

“Just us?” *No Svetlana*, Shane doesn’t say. He doesn’t want Ilya to be reminded of her existence.

“Yes, just us.”

**

Seventeen years old

Ilya plays the piano on Shane’s 16th. It’s not perfect but Shane tears up.

“Yes, you better cry, веснушки. I practiced hard for this.”

“You’re such an asshole.” Asshole might as well be a term of endearment the way he says it.

“Thanks a lot.”

He caresses the underside of Shane’s eyes. “Anything for my husband.” Yelps and hops away when Shane pretends to bite his hand off.

They skip their meeting in favor of lazing about in Shane’s room. Ilya loves to dump his entire weight on him and he’s currently doing it now, lying across Shane in the shape of a multiplication sign.

“I smell cigarettes,” Shane says.

“No you do not.”

“You’re literally lying on top of me.”

“I had just one.”

“You said you quit.”

Ilya signs, twisting until he’s lying straight, his crucifix dangling in Shane’s face. “I quit last week.”

“You’re gonna look me right in the eye and lie to me?”

“Yes because you believe it when I do that.”

“Make it believable at least.”

“Fine, I will quit.”

“I don’t believe you, Ilyusha.”

Ilya’s eyes go impossibly soft. He groans, burrowing into Shane’s chest. “моя маленькая бабочка, you will kill me.” Voice muffled in Shane’s shirt. “I love it when you call me that.”

Shane hugs Ilya's neck and rests his chin atop his curls. "You're only saying that to distract me from your smoking."

"You must believe me."

"Okay, Ilyusha," Shane says and laughs when Ilya shivers and lets out a slew of Russian words.

He makes a mental note to learn the language.

**

Eighteen years

Ilya is absent from the welcoming party when Shane and his family arrive in Moscow but Shane doesn't panic. Two nights ago, they stayed up talking on the phone. Ilya had some exciting news to share but wanted to tell Shane in person. Before boarding, Shane called him at the airport and they also texted for a while on the flight.

Shane rushes through pleasantries and goes to find Ilya in the library. Ilya turns at the sound of the door, lips stretching in a smile that splits his bruised lips. There's a large patch of discoloration on the right side of Ilya's face. Shane freezes at the door, weakened by anger and helplessness.

"Shanya, is okay." Ilya dabs the blood from his lips with a paper napkin.

"This is not okay."

When it becomes apparent that Shane isn't going to move, Ilya rises and comes to him instead. He gently cups Shane's face as though he is the one with a nasty bruise and a split lip.

"Am fine. Look at me."

"I'm so sorry, Ilya."

"This is not your fault, no? Do not be sorry."

"Still it sucks."

"Yes."

"Will you at least tell me what happened?"

"Papa wanted to get rid of Mama's things. I would not let him. He hit me." He shrugs. "No big deal."

"Shit, Ilya." Shane pulls him into a hug. They are not of similar height anymore and Ilya's shoulders seem to grow broader every time Shane sees him but he shrinks himself enough to

fit in Shane's arms, face tucking into Shane's neck. Shane holds him close, rocking them slightly on his feet.

"Sorry." Ilya's tears are cool against Shane's skin.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's gonna be okay."

Later, they stretch out on the carpeted floor with their backs against the couch. The curtains are drawn shut and only a single light at the end of the couch illuminates the room. Ilya has just finished a Jos Louis pack, his favorite and the only thing he asks Shane to bring from Canada, and is now playfully wrestling Shane's socked toes with his.

"What's the exciting news you wanted to share?"

Ilya grins. "Papa said we will move to Canada when I am twenty. Russia will not be so friendly when our engagement is announced to the world."

"Really?" Shane separates his back from the couch. He does the mental math and gasps. Ilya will move to Canada in two years. "Really!?"

He laughs. "Yes. I will get stupid Canadian passport and buy stupid snack myself."

"Shut up. You like it."

"I will marry my neurotic Canadian husband."

"Who even taught you that word?" Shane is dizzy with joy.

"Is same in Russian."

His smile is almost splitting his face. "I am not neurotic. But Ilya," Shane is almost bouncing. "Do you know what that means? We will see each other more than four times a year."

"I did not think of that at all."

"Asshole. We'll be together 24/7. Ugh, two years is too far away."

"I know." Ilya is somber all of a sudden. "Is too far away."

Shane settles back against the couch, face turned toward his friend. "I'm sorry."

"Mama," Ilya starts, noticeably struggling to get the words out. "She was so beautiful. But she was so sad and so lonely. Papa tells everyone that her death was an accident. She swallowed a bottle of pills."

"Oh, Ilya."

"I found her." His chin wobbles. "Sorry." He starts to turn his face away but Shane doesn't let him.

"Hey hey, you have nothing to be sorry for."

“I did not find her on time. If I were faster, maybe she would have lived. It is my fault—,”

“No,” Shane holds Ilya tighter as he tries to hide his face again. “Look at me, Ilyusha. It’s not your fault. None of it was your fault.”

On some nights, Ilya would call and say nothing at all, his breath filling the static quiet of the phone. Shane knows without asking that it is when he misses his mother the most.

Shane touches the bruise on Ilya’s face gently. “I wish I could steal you away.”

Ilya smiles sadly. “I would let you.”

“I’d take you somewhere far away. Somewhere our families couldn’t reach us. Probably to a place where nobody knows us.” He thumbs away the remaining tears on his face. “We could be normal.”

“Boring?”

“Maybe.” The lamp at the end of the couch glows around Ilya’s head like a halo. His bruises are not so visible now but the shine in his eyes is. How could someone so broken be so beautiful? “Tonight,” Shane says. “We could run away together.” He knows it’s impossible. Lying is not something Shane enjoys or actively partakes in but he knows that people are comforted by it. “We could meet at my hotel lobby at midnight and sneak off.”

“Are you serious?” The hopefulness in Ilya’s eyes makes the lie worth it.

“A faraway place where nobody would recognize us, right?”

“Shanya.” Ilya breathes. He closes in until the tips of their noses brush. Until his palm is warm against Shane’s cheek. “Where would we go?”

“Somewhere with a beach. I’d like to walk along the beach with you.”

Ilya closes his eyes and Shane immediately misses their blue depths. “You will hold my hand?” Shane nods, too choked up to even manage a whisper. “We will wear matching shirts like on TV, yes?”

“Yes.”

His thumb caresses the shell of Shane’s ear. “Shanya, мой муж. I want that, I want that so much.”

Shane closes the distance between them, pressing his lips once to his best friend's forehead and twice to the edge of his lips. He pulls back with bated breath to catch Ilya’s eyes. They are widened in shock. Shane panics. Was he not supposed to?

The kiss suddenly tastes like a huge ‘what if’ on his tongue. What if this changes everything? What if he ruined everything? Ilya only talks about kissing girls.

He swallows around the lump of regret in his throat and forces out a weak, “Ilya, I didn’t—,”

The words are pushed back into his mouth by a firm press of lips against his own. He lets out a small sound of surprise which comes out more like a whimper. He's alarmed by the way his body turns into the kiss, every ounce of uncertainty slipping through his fingers as they cling onto both sides of Ilya's waist. It's thrilling— too overwhelming, he feels everything and nothing at once as his world narrows down to the way his lips move against Ilya's slightly swollen ones and the jolt of electricity that passes through him as the pads of Ilya's fingers sink into his neck and drag him closer, pulling him over his legs.

He burns with a sudden wave of want that has been festering under his skin for years. A need that compels him to chase desperately at Ilya's lips when he briefly breaks the kiss to adjust Shane into his lap. Ilya chuckles softly before grabbing Shane's jaw between his thumb and index fingers and licking into his mouth. It is sinful. It is intoxicating. It is nothing like he has ever felt. Ever allowed himself to consider a possibility.

Shane has always wanted Ilya— fuck, he has never wanted anything more desperately. How many times did he wish he were one of the girls Ilya bragged about kissing? How many times has he touched himself, pushing out images of his best friend and feeling guilt upon failure?

He could live here forever, in Ilya's arms with their lips affixed, their erections straining against the fabric of their pants, his heart roaring in his ears. In this little library that Irina left behind.

"Shane, honey." Yuna's voice hits them like a bucket of ice. They jump apart but Shane doesn't get too far because Ilya won't let him. "Be at the car in ten." She calls out as the soft clack of her heels on the marble floor fades away.

Shane lets out a long exhale, shutting his eyes against the sudden rush of feelings. Fuck! He doesn't want to leave.

"Hey, Shanya. Is okay." Ilya soothes his palms down Shane's back, ducking down to catch his eyes. "Is okay. Just breathe." Shane follows the sound of his voice and his breathing pattern. Ilya smiles encouragingly. "My brave Shanya."

"I don't want to go. It's so unfair."

"It will be over soon, yes?" Shane nods. His eyes drift to Ilya's lips again. And Ilya, as if reading his mind, leans in and kisses Shane. It's chaste and ends too soon but he understands that he has to go. Ilya rises first and then helps Shane to his feet. He flips some switches on the wall to flood the room with light. His bruises look more garish under the full illumination.

Shane winces. "Sorry."

"I am better now. You kiss it better, младенец."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

“Can I kiss you again?”

“Da.” He takes Shane’s chin and draws him in for a longer kiss.

Shane keeps his eyes shut long after their lips part. “I’ll miss you.”

Ilya locks his arms around Shane. “You are singing to the choir.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Shane amends, smiling. Ilya smiles back softly.

After that, they gingerly pull their shoes on and join Shane’s parents at the entrance. Grigori and Alexei, unsurprisingly, are missing. Yuna frowns when she sees Ilya’s face. Her lips draw thin, swallowing whatever she must have wanted to say. A show of restraint if Shane has ever seen one. She’s not the type to keep her thoughts to herself.

“I’ll see you soon?” Shane whispers, grazing Ilya’s bruised cheek with his knuckles. He doesn’t care that his parents are watching. Ilya will be his husband in 7 years. Ilya’s eyes widen as Shane leans in to smack a kiss across his lips.

“See you later.” Ilya squeaks, cheeks unceremoniously tinted. He throws his hand at David and Yuna who seem unsurprised by the turn of events before tripping all the way back to the house.

Halfway to the hotel Shane’s phone pings.

Ilyusha💙

See you later 🥰

He releases the smile he has been fighting since he left the Rozanovs’.

**

Shane wakes up the next morning to twenty-six missed calls and two messages from Ilya.

Ilyusha💙

00:00

here

Missed facetime call

Ilyusha💙

02:00

Shanya?

Shane calls Ilya’s phone. It goes through but there’s no response. He calls several more times to no avail. His hands are shaking by the time he starts scrolling through the news. He’s only

slightly relieved when nothing about Ilya comes up. He calls Yuna who answers almost immediately.

“Mom, can you call Grigori and check up on Ilya?”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I don’t know. Please?”

“Okay.”

Shane bites his nails as he waits. Yuna calls back after a couple of minutes. Ilya is home. Shane exhales and calls him again. Still no answer. He sends a text back.

Shane
9:00

Hey, Ilya. Saw your missed calls. Shoot me a text when you see this. I’ll probably be on the plane when you do. See you ❤️

Shane alternates between calling Ilya and checking his phone until he boards his flight. He begins to worry when his phone stays dry for two hours after landing in Canada. He calls Ilya and sends messages. All texts tick blue.

It takes an embarrassing amount of time for Shane to realize that Ilya is deliberately ignoring him. When it dawns, at first he feels sadness. He sends multiple texts, despondent whenever it ticks blue. He reads their old conversations, lingering on *see you later* 🙋🏻🙋🏻.

After a week of moping comes anger. This is not his fault. Ilya kissed him back! If he was going to panic, he shouldn’t have. He wants to be as stubborn as Ilya and give him a taste of his own medicine by ignoring him. But he caves at each attempt.

Shane
00:00

I miss you Ilyusha. Can you pick up?

00:05

You don’t have to speak if you don’t want to. I can listen to you breathing.

read

The months pass slowly and painfully without Ilya. Shane resorts to hunting for news of him in the Russian press again. His heart lurches whenever he sees Ilya. He saves paparazzi pictures like a creep and sends Ilya messages he never responds to.

Shane
12:00

Hey, Ilya. It's my 19th birthday. I guess I got used to reading your messages first thing in the morning.

I hoped you'd pity me and send something today.

How are you? Have you made any new friends? I saw you in the news with someone called Sasha. They called you the most eligible heirs of Moscow.

I made a friend too. His name is Hayden. I met him when I followed Dad to the country club. I can't wait to see you in two weeks.

read

**

All of Shane's enthusiasm for Ilya's visit fades when the Rozanovs arrive wearing matching stony looks. Ilya sits through meetings he formerly called boring and urged Shane to skip, forcing Shane to sit and endure the endless droning of their lawyers' voices. The only thing that makes it somewhat bearable is staring at Ilya's face across the table.

At the end of the meeting, while the adults bid their final courtesies, Shane chases Ilya down the hall. "Ilya!" Ilya walks faster. "Stop!" He quickens his pace. "Ilyusha!"

Ilya spins around, voice thundering. "Do not fucking call me that!"

Shane recoils at the fury on Ilya's face. "What the hell is your problem!?"

"Fuck, Hollander! Can't you leave me the fuck alone?" Not *my husband*, not *Shanya*, not even Shane. Hollander.

"What did I do wrong!?" He hates the helpless tremble in his voice.

Ilya huffs an unkind laugh. "Do you want a list!?"

"Fuck you! You shouldn't have touched me if you were going to be an asshole about it!" Shane swipes at his face to stop his tears from breaking containment. "I'm done calling you, texting you, and making a fool of myself."

"That is what I want, no?"

"Oh fuck you, Rozanov!"

Shane quickly walks away without waiting to hear any more of Ilya's hurtful words. He sequesters himself in his room and doesn't go to see the Rozanovs off. He gets the feeling that the days of hugging Ilya goodbye by the car are over. He closes his eyes and refuses to let his tears fall.

**

Shane successfully stays away for three days before falling back into old patterns of stalking Ilya in the news. Regret follows instantly.

Inside Ilya Rozanov's wild night out with long-term girlfriend, Svetlana Vetrova.

Shane's heart drops. The attached photos make bile rise in his throat. Ilya has his arms around her in one. In another one which looks like it could've been taken right after the first one, his lips are pressed to her cheek. She's sitting in his lap in a different shot. Ilya looks happy in every frame. Shane holds his trembling lower lip between his teeth. It was foolish of him to believe he was enough to make Ilya Rozanov happy.

Shane makes it to the toilet before throwing up everything he ate for supper. He drops onto the bathroom floor, pulling his knees to his chest, and tries to breathe the way Ilya taught him back in Russia.

More than anything, it is knowing Ilya is okay that breaks him. For months, he convinced himself that Ilya must miss him too. That he too gets heartburn at the thought of Shane. That his eyes sting with tears when he misses him. That he lies in bed at night, thumb hovering over the call button or scrolling up to read their older messages. That his heart randomly clenches so painfully it feels like he ruptured something.

But he doesn't. He is okay. More than okay. Did he ever care? The question will haunt him forever.

A sob rips itself from Shane's throat as he comes to the terrifying realization that what he's experiencing is heartbreak. What a fool he is to have gone and fallen irrevocably in love with his husband.

As a despairing last resort, he calls Ilya's phone again. This time the call does not go through at all.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

Now

“What are you doing here, Hollander?” Ilya asks after the initial shock wears off.

Shane speechlessly brushes past him into the cottage only to get away from the scorching sun. Cold air slaps his face and cools the sweat beginning to bead on his back. Rattled and so fucking out of his mind, he tasks himself with something to do. The groceries. He could put the perishables in the fridge first. Yes.

He moves around the cottage, ignoring the footsteps trailing behind him, reminiscent of their very first meeting. He finds the kitchen easily. It is large and looks mostly untouched except for the opened bag of chips on the island. Shane turns his nose up at it as he beelines for the fridge. It is stocked with a gallon of milk, endless cans of Coke, and some bottles of water.

Shane empties two packs of ginger ale into the fridge along with the water he bought. Next comes the vegetables which fit perfectly into the crisper bin. He straightens when he’s done, hoping to find something else to do. All he finds is Ilya who has been observing him, looking far too entertained for Shane’s liking.

The last time they were in the same room together, Ilya said he couldn’t imagine a life more torturous than saddling himself with Shane. They were both upset and yelling but Ilya’s words had cut so deeply.

He could concoct reasons why Ilya would be at the cottage on the day of their marriage but he’s not stupid. It appears that before he thought about jilting his fiancé, his fiancé had already jilted him. Rozanov one-upped him right up until the end.

It’s absurd to be terribly gutted by something he has done himself but his heart registers it as another blow. He suddenly wants to get out of this cottage, away from Ilya, and probably out of this country.

He faces Ilya, hooking his thumbs into his pockets. “My car broke down. I need to call an Uber.”

Ilya's smile falls in a cinematic sequence. “You are leaving?”

“Your presence defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

His brows come together as the cogs turn in his head. Shane can pinpoint the moment it clicks. He nods to himself, thumbs swiping over his nose. “You did not come here to find me.”

This of all things is what sets Shane off. “You are so fucking full of yourself. What did you think? That I realized you jilted me and decided to chase after you like some fool and— and what? Brought you some groceries!?”

“You could not be so kind, no.”

“I’m here to get away from you!”

Ilya scoffs, backing away. “You speak like I want to marry you.”

“Clearly not, Rozanov. You fucking ran away!”

“So did you!” He snaps. “Perfect Hollander. Perfect son. You cannot marry lazy Ilya.” He sounds progressively more upset. “I will corrupt your perfect bloodline, yes!”

“What!? What are you even talking about!?”

“You will not marry me but you think I should have— what is Canadian word— sucked it up and married you?”

“Like you would ever do anything that didn’t serve you!”

“What do you want from me, Hollander!?” His posture is entirely closed off now and his quaking voice echoes through the empty cottage. “I left you alone! You did not have to come all the way here to—,” he cuts himself off, breathing through his nose. “Fuck!”

“I don’t want to be here either!”

“Fucking leave then!”

Shane couldn’t tell you when he moved but they are standing toe to toe now. Breathing heavily through the silence following their outburst. Ilya is shaken more than Shane has ever seen him. Good. He should feel half of the frustration Shane suffers because of him.

Shane falls back first, putting some well-needed space between them. He looks away from his runaway fiancé to catch his breath. “My car broke down and there’s no signal on my phone.” He is calmer now. “I still need to call an Uber.”

“No signal here.” Ilya dismisses and starts walking off. It’s Shane’s turn to shadow him.

“Where did you park your car? Let me borrow it. I’ll have someone drive it back.”

“I did not drive. Svetlana drove me last night.”

Shane tenses, eyes twitching. His newfound composure flies out the window. He laughs humorlessly. “Your girlfriend drove you last night? God, Rozanov, you couldn’t wait to get away from me, could you?”

Ilya faces him. “Hollander.” His voice is cautioning.

“How long have you been plotting to abandon me? You know you could’ve just let me in on this great plan, right? I would’ve stepped aside for true love to prevail.”

“Svetlana is a friend.”

“A friend you sleep with.”

“Is not your business.”

“You are my husband, Ilya! You are my business!” Fuck. A pindrop could be heard from a mile away after the slip. His heart is pounding so fast he’s almost vibrating with it. Shane is famously known for his poise and flat affect. Some even call him a robot. What is it about Ilya that makes him feel so much, reveal so much?

“No Hollander,” Ilya sniffs. “I am not.”

“Right,” Shane whispers, nodding to himself. “I’ll just go.” He sticks his thumb in the direction he hopes is the entrance and turns toward it. It isn’t. He makes an embarrassing turn around to the actual entrance.

“Where are you going?”

“Leaving!”

Shane stomps out of the house into the unforgiving sun. He keeps his head high as he walks along the path he just came from. It’s easier without the extra luggage. Fuck, his luggage. Ilya can have it. The most important thing is getting out of here. His fucking groceries wouldn’t be the first things Ilya took from him.

The thought is aggravating enough to pump his brakes. Why should Ilya have to win again? Why does he get to stay at the cottage? If anyone should stay, it should be Shane. It’s his parents’ gift. With a new goal, he makes a U-turn toward the cottage, panting as he barges through the door, relieved to feel the cold air, and annoyed to find Rozanov going through his groceries.

He looks up upon Shane’s entry without an iota of surprise. It’s like he knew Shane would return. “You caught me, Hollander.” He grins.

“Don’t touch my stuff.”

He lifts his hands in surrender. “I thought you ran away like Chicken.”

“You are the chicken. You ran away from your wedding.”

“So did you.”

“You ran away first with your mistress.”

“Maybe you are the mistress, Hollander.”

“Oh fuck you, Rozanov.” Shane shoves him away from his things. “I’ve been your fiancé before we were born. You met her at what— eleven? I’m not the mistress.”

“That is not how it works. You make no sense.”

“Neither do you.” He turns to Ilya with fierce determination, his arms across his chest. “I think you should leave.”

His brows rise comically. “Leave?”

“Leave the cottage. It’s mine.”

“Ah, no. This is our wedding gift.” He gestures between them. “Yuna and David handed the keys to me. They said, ‘Oh, poor Ilya, this is gift for putting up with our son’.”

“You are so full of shit. Well, there’s no wedding so you don’t have to put up with me.”

“No take-backs.”

“You’re being irrational.”

“Look Hollander, I am not going back there to face all the chaos we must have left behind.”

Shane did not stop to consider that. The media, their parents’ ire, the public’s sentiment. Oh God, all the fans who supported them. For the first time in his life, he made a decision without mapping out consequences. He drops his forehead onto the cool counter and breathes through his nose. His family’s business, their legacy, might collapse and it will all be his fault. Shane holds his stomach as dread curdles inside him. Fuck. He breathes. In and out. In and out.

Meanwhile, Ilya watches silently. Shane tries not to remember younger Ilya, holding Shane through his panic attack and telling him how brave he was. That boy is gone, replaced by this mountain of a man, whose favourite pastime is wringing Shane’s already worn and broken heart to get the last drop of blood.

He breathes until his pulse decelerates, and the ache in his stomach becomes bearable.

“What do we do now?” Shane asks, head still bowed. “We can’t live here together. You hate me.”

Ilya does not deny it. “We don’t have to see each other.”

That would be possible anywhere else but the cottage is not big enough for that. “You know that’s impossible.”

“Then we don’t have to talk. Jesus Hollander, is not a big deal.”

“Okay.” Shane pulls himself up and looks at Ilya. “Okay. I can do that.”

“You feel better now?”

“I’ll feel better when I get away from you.”

Ilya smiles. “Who is asshole now?”

“That’s still you, Rozanov. I want the master bedroom.”

He tsks. “Not happening. I got here first.”

“You ran away first,” Shane mutters, bitterly.

Ilya shrugs. “Same difference. Moreover, only the master bedroom is furnished. But I think I saw an air mattress—,”

“I’m not sleeping on an air mattress!”

“Sleep on the couch then.”

“How about you sleep on the couch?” Ilya laughs right in his face. “Okay,” Shane concedes. “We will share the master bedroom.”

Ilya’s gaze rakes over him slowly. He shakes his head. “No.”

“You try and stop me, Rozanov. It’s mine as much as it’s yours. We’ll share that bed, come fire or brimstone.”

“If you insist.”

He fell right into that one. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, I know, Hollander. Welcome to our honeymoon.”

**

The first day at the cottage goes exactly how Shane imagined their married life the few times he allowed himself to think about it. Quiet, tense, and lonely. Shane is a creature of solitude. It took a lot for him to feel lonely but Rozanov always seemed to find a way.

He makes a salad for lunch while Ilya stuffs his mouth with instant noodles at the island where Shane is mixing vegetables. How Ilya maintains that body with what he eats is beyond him.

“Mister rabbit man,” he taunts when Shane takes a bite of his salad.

“Salad is healthy.” Shane defends and leaves the kitchen.

For dinner, Ilya lights up the grill outside and flips burgers shirtless. He has been shirtless since Shane came in which is crazy because the closet is full of his clothes. Shane came here with his wedding tux, four pairs of underwear, three shorts, three t-shirts, and an old pair of Reebok. Ilya on the other hand came overly prepared.

Shane wonders how long Ilya has been planning his escape. If he hadn't shown up, would Svetlana have joined him later? If not Svetlana, it would've been one of his many lovers. Ilya has been spotted with an assortment of models, influencers, reality TV stars, and actresses since he relocated to Canada five years ago. Year twenty, the year that was supposed to give him everything became one of the worst of Shane's life. Then it went downhill from there.

There's a slight chill in the air now. Shane sits at the unlit fire pit with a can of ginger ale and resolutely refuses to peek at Ilya wolfing down his burgers a couple of steps away. In the background, the sun is setting across the lake with vibrant red and orange hues. It is beautiful. A juxtaposition to the ugly feelings encamping in Shane's chest.

He stares at the beautiful sunset and grieves his lofty teenage dreams. In a different reality, Shane would have his happy ending. They'd be married right now, on a plane to somewhere far away where they were nobodies. "Many places to see," Ilya said. They'd find a beach and walk along its shores hand in hand. They would get matching shirts and relive the taste of tropical fruits on each other's lips. And more importantly, they'd be happy. Ilya would be so happy. And he would be because of Shane.

The view turns wobbly behind his eyes. Shane looks at his empty ring finger and bites his lip to suppress a whine. The next sip of ginger ale tastes like bile. He throws it in a bin and retreats into the house.

Later that night, Shane curls on his side of the bed and stares at the wall until his eyes start leaking. Luckily, he has mastered the art of crying without making a sound.

**

When Shane wakes up the next day, Ilya's heavy arm is resting on his chest. He flings it off, laughing when his companion grumbles out complaints. But that also means Ilya is awake too.

He shuffles into the bathroom, eyes half closed as Shane applies paste to his brush. Shane levels him with a glare. "There's a door."

"Good job, Hollander. What else do you see?"

"Fuck off. You should've knocked. I could've been naked."

Ilya settles beside Shane, picking up his toothbrush from the holder. "Is nothing I have not seen before?"

Shane chokes. He spits and coughs for almost a minute. "That's inappropriate. Don't ever mention that to me again."

"What? That I have seen you naked?"

"You are unbelievable. The day just started!"

Ilya smirks. "Good morning to you too, Hollander."

“Asshole,” Shane mumbles and quickly finishes brushing. He makes sure to knock Ilya into the sink on his way out.

After that, he puts on a T-shirt and his running shoes and finds the gym. Shane hops on the treadmill and runs for twenty minutes followed by another twenty of strength training. Then he stays an extra ten minutes in the gym, hesitant to go out there and face the Russian demon.

His reservations are justified when he finds Ilya, freshly showered and manning the coffee maker. He’s half naked, dressed in shorts that settle low on his Adonis belt. Shane swallows to lubricate his dry throat. He frowns at Ilya, suddenly irritated. Rips his treacherous eyes from his biceps and clears his throat to get his attention.

“Hollander.” Ilya’s gaze travels from Shane’s sweat-damp hair to his shorts and back to his face. “I’m making breakfast. Go take a shower.”

“Breakfast. For me?”

“No. I am making for myself but I will share with my wife.”

“Shut up!”

“Shower, Hollander.”

“Kay.” Shane turns away, fighting a smile. He showers quickly and changes into clean clothes. Ilya is by the stove now, eyebrows bunched, lips pursed as he focuses on the simple task of frying an egg.

“The eggs won’t grow legs and chase you,” Shane announces his presence.

Ilya looks up only for a second before facing his eggs again. “No, but you will nag if your yolk spills into the whites.”

Shane did not think Ilya paid any attention to him during their tense obligatory family breakfasts. His chest grows warmer. “It’s a texture thing.”

“Hmm, come toast the bread. I will not touch your disgusting bread.”

“It’s whole wheat. It’s healthy.” Shane defends.

“And disgusting.”

“Shut up,” Shane mumbles but pops two slices of wheat bread in the toaster. Just to be nice, he adds two slices of Ilya’s white bread in there too. While he waits for the bread, he pours two cups of coffee while Ilya cuts an avocado open.

They eat at the breakfast bar with an extra seat creating a barrier between them. It’s a quiet breakfast until Ilya speaks.

“What are your plans today?”

“I dunno, make some calls or drive to the local sushi shop.”

“Hollander.” The green in his eyes wins over the blue in the morning light. “When did you develop a sense of humor?”

“I’ve always been funny.”

“Not really, no. Too serious, Hollander.” Ilya speaks around his food. “Very boring. Boring clothes, boring books, boring shoes, boring ginger ale. I look at you and I want to go to bed. Boring boring boring.”

Shane had an inkling, when headlines about party animal Rozanov started rolling in, that Ilya must have gotten bored with him and found more interesting people to associate with. Throughout their years of friendship, all they ever did was hide in the music room at Shane’s home or stretch out on the floor of Irina’s library.

Shane knows to leave it alone. He has left it alone for a long time but today, for whatever reason, he asks. “Is that the reason?”

“Reason for what?”

“Why you don’t want me? Is it because I’m boring? Too boring to keep up with you?”

The mirth falls from Ilya’s face. “What the fuck are you talking about, Hollander?”

“I could try to stop being boring. Not— not for you obviously. But in the future, when I find someone, I don’t want them to leave because I’m boring.”

Ilya’s scowl deepens. “You ruin everything, Hollander.” He climbs off his stool, snatching up his plate from the counter. “I make you breakfast and this is how you pay me back?”

Shane is perplexed. He grabs his own plate and follows Ilya to the bin, dumping his leftovers after him. “You used my eggs and avocado! Why did I think we could have a normal adult conversation!?”

Ilya dumps his plate in the sink. “I am going to the gym. Wash the dishes. I cooked.” He stomps off angrily.

**

They don’t say another word to each other for the rest of the day. Shane’s heartburn gets so bad in the middle of the night. He bites his fist to muffle his tears. It’s the only thing that alleviates the pain.

**

Then

Twenty years old

Shane meets Rose Landry at a bar on his 20th birthday.

His propensity to get claustrophobic in crowded places plus the added stress of getting papped and plastered all over the internet took away the appeal of leaving his apartment.

A couple of weeks ago, he joined Jackie, Hayden's girlfriend for a yoga class and the headline was, ***Is Shane Hollander buzzing around his best friend's honey?*** It was mortifying but Hayden and Jackie found it so funny that they called him a bee for a couple of weeks.

So yes, he wasn't so keen on going out, especially at night where shadows and angles could tell any story they wanted to.

But today is his birthday and Hayden promised to show him the time of his life. Shane realized Hayden wanted it more than he did so he acquiesced only to make his friend happy. He clinks glasses with some strangers. Takes two shots of fernet-branca. And dances with Jackie and Hayden. It's a friendly atmosphere but Shane is ready to go back home two hours in.

He escapes the crowd to a nearby booth which looks empty at a glance until he sits. That's how he meets Rose. Shane is a bit sheltered but not too much not to know Rose Landry. She's in all the latest films and on almost every billboard in the city. He is star-struck from the outset and quite perplexed when she strikes up a conversation.

Talking to Rose is easy. She laughs at everything Shane says and listens attentively while he speaks. Shane grows increasingly fond of her as the night wears on so when she leans in after they hug goodbye, he kisses her back. And when he gets home and sees a video with a TMZ watermark of him and Rose kissing, he's not as bothered as he thought he would be.

He had already made plans to meet Rose again next week and wouldn't mind starting something with her. This could also get Hayden off his back about moping over Ilya, which for the record he isn't. Just because he doesn't fancy hopping around in strangers' beds does not mean he's hung up on a fiancé he kissed once almost two years ago.

Shane's musings are interrupted by a message notification. He reaches blindly for his phone on the nightstand, expecting a long voice note from Hayden who must have seen the news.

Three messages from Ilyusha 💙

He unlocks his phone with his heart in his mouth.

Ilyusha 💙
01:00

you arw datinf rose lanfry now

better thsn me yes?

pwrfwct hollander with perfwct girlfriemd

Ilya messages him for the first time in years and it's to congratulate him on his 'girlfriend'. Shane vacates his bed, too jittery to sit still. He paces his room as he reads the messages over and over again. What does this mean? Does Ilya keep up with him? Does he perhaps miss Shane? Shane dispels that fantasy quickly. Rose is very popular. Ilya must have found out because of her. Still, the idea that Ilya read something about him leaves a buzz under his skin that has been absent for a while. Holding his phone steady, he types out a reply and hits send.

Shane

01:09

Hey Ilya, it's been a while. How have you been? I'm doing quite well myself. I didn't expect to hear from you so I'm lost on what to say. Maybe we can talk properly at our next meeting or sooner if you'd like. We could grab a drink or have dinner. Let me know x

Not delivered. Message blocking is active

Shane shuts his eyes against the chill in his bones. The high plummets to a low he hasn't felt in two years. He's dialing Rose's number before he knows what he's doing. When he realizes, he goes to end the call but hears an enthusiastic, "Hello."

"Hey, Rose."

"You must be the first man to sound so miserable about having dating rumors with me."

"No, it's not that. I'm thrilled."

"Why do you sound the opposite of thrilled?"

"I don't know. I didn't know who to call." Hayden would've given him an I told you so speech. "I guess I wanted someone to talk to."

"Hey Shane." Her voice goes softer. "You can talk to me about anything."

"I'm uh— I'm engaged."

"What?!"

"Contractually. I've been engaged since before I was born." Shane tells her all about Ilya. From their childhood to the messages tonight. Rose listens and doesn't try to offer any advice. He appreciates it. She makes a joke about Shane being her ninth gay boyfriend and swears they've just become the bestest friends. He feels better when the call ends.

Before going back to bed, he opens his contact list and searches for Ilya's name. He scrolls down to the block contact option. Stares at it for a while and scrolls back up. He can't do it. He wants Ilya to be able to reach out when he needs him. So he does the next best thing. He edits Ilyusha  to Ilyusha.

**

Shane skips out on their next family meeting. He's still mad at himself for his eager response to Ilya. He can only be consoled by the fact that Ilya blocked him before he sent the message. He might have died of embarrassment if his heartache hadn't taken him first. He makes up a lie about being sick and stays in his penthouse apartment, scrolling through the news to find anything on Ilya.

At the end of the day, he receives another message from Ilya.

Ilyusha
20:00

you are too good for meetings now, hollander?

Shane doesn't respond right away. Ten minutes later, he checks and just as suspected, Ilya has blocked him again. He's more annoyed than sad this time.

Just to spite Ilya, Shane follows Rose to a party she has been begging him to attend and makes sure every camera at the party is pointed at them when he pulls Rose close and kisses her.

The Rozanovs request an emergency meeting the next day.

**

Shane and Ilya sit across from each other in the ginormous meeting room in the Rozanovs' home. Yuna is at Shane's left and Gagnon, the family's head lawyer is on his right. Ilya is bracketed by Alexei, who is in attendance in Grigori's place, his face set in its patented unpleasant scowl, and the Rozanovs' lawyer, Sergei.

"So," Sergei begins. "I know we are all very busy people so we will keep this meeting brief. Mr. Rozanov here...", he points to Ilya. "Informs me that Mr. Hollander has breached the terms of the contract."

Shane narrows his eyes at Ilya who has refused to look at him since he took his seat, jaw set tight and palms resting stiffly on the table. "I've done nothing wrong."

The man pauses, glancing at Ilya and then at the papers spread across the table. "May I know who Miss Rose Landry is?"

Ilya looks up for that, raising his eyebrows challengingly when Shane hesitates to answer. "Hollander, answer the question."

Shane refuses to speak until Yuna elbows him softly in his ribs. He sighs. "Rose is a friend."

Ilya scoffs. "Not what I saw."

"You literally walk around with your tongue down Svetlana's throat. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"Is not like that. Svetlana is my best friend."

That somehow stings more than if Ilya admitted he was going to break their engagement to elope to the countryside with Svetlana.

“Yeah well, Rose is my friend too.” She is. The whole kissing thing was her idea.

Their lawyers exchange tired looks. Then Gagnon speaks, “Mr. Rozanov, you were worried about Mr. Hollander damaging the integrity of your partnership....,”

Shane scoffs and shakes his head.

“...integrity of your partnership by—,” he squints at his open laptop. “Flaunting his very famous, very perfect girlfriend to the world?” He looks toward Ilya who responds with a firm nod. “And you demand that he put a stop to that with immediate effect?”

“Rozanov is in no position to demand anything from me. It’s actually so disingenuous that he gets away with *flaunting* his models and actresses to the world but throws a fit when I do the same thing.”

“Not the same thing,” Ilya argues. “We are close to announcement date. Bad look for you to do this now.”

“Bullshit!”

“Language, Hollander,” Ilya says calmly. Shane wants to punch his gorgeous face.

“Honey, Ilya is right. The announcement date is drawing nearer,” Yuna says, which gets a big nod from Ilya. “This could be damaging to our reputation.”

“Mom, Rose is nice. You’ve met her.”

“She met your parents?” Ilya interjects with a rictus smile. “You like her that much, Hollander? Why don’t you marry her?”

“I might.”

“You won’t, Shane,” Yuna says in her business voice. “Ilya, we’ve heard your concerns. Shane will cease to make any more suggestive public statements with Rose.”

“Only if Rozanov stops making suggestive public statements with his one hundred and ten lovers.”

“I have no lovers.”

“And I am the pope.”

“Pope would not date famous Rose Landry.”

“Gentlemen please,” Sergei cuts in. “Do you agree to the terms, Mr. Rozanov?”

“Depends.” Ilya stares Shane dead in the eyes. “If Hollander will stop making out with movie stars.”

“One movie star.” Shane amends. A muscle in Ilya’s jaw jumps which he counts as a small victory. “Okay,” he yields. “No public displays with Rose.”

“Very well. I’ll draft the new agreement and mail it over to Mr. Gagnon for review.” Sergei starts shoving his documents into his bag, eager to escape.

“Same here,” Gagnon says. “I’ll beg for my leave now.”

Yuna nods. Alexei, who has said not even a single word since arriving because his English knowledge is zilch, stands and follows the lawyers out. Ilya makes no effort to move and neither does Shane. Yuna’s eyes flit between them for a moment. She sighs and vacates the room too.

Alone, Ilya pulls his chair forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Rose Landry, hmm? I did not think you had it in you, Hollander.” Shane doesn’t respond so he goes on. “You are too sick for meeting but not too sick for celebrity sex party, hmm? What, you cannot speak?”

“I didn’t think I was allowed to speak. Is that not your modus? Say your piece and quickly block the other person from responding?”

“Modus? You are making up words.”

“*Flaunting?*” Shane sneers with air quotes. “Did your American girlfriend teach you that?”

“No, I saw on TV. Is funny word.”

Shane shuts the door on the memory of younger Ilya cracking up over funny-sounding words. “What about *integrity?*”

Ilya scratches the back of his neck. “I uh— I read that in the New Yorker. Crossword puzzles.”

Shane’s dad loves crossword puzzles but he doesn’t mention it. What would Ilya do with information like that? “Your English is better now.”

“Hmm.” He hums. It’s silent for a beat. Then, “You are in love with Rose Landry?”

“What?”

“Your famous perfect girlfriend.”

“Would that change anything? I’m marrying you anyway.”

“Good. I thought you forgot.”

Shane bites his top lip. “And you? Are you in love with Svetlana?”

“What does it matter? You will warm my bed one day.”

“Oh fuck you, Rozanov!”

Ilya starts smiling but catches himself. “I should er— I should go.” He stands, closing the button on the ridiculous burgundy suit he put on for the occasion. He looks unfairly handsome. “Make sure to sign the papers.”

“Make sure?” Shane mutters incredulously. “You sign the papers!” He throws back. This time, Ilya grins broadly as he leaves the room.

Shane slumps forward after his exit. He thumps his forehead repeatedly against the polished wood. Rozanov will be the death of him.

Chapter End Notes

I was feeling too lazy to update but I received a comment from olivecatlovesthem that made me smile so here I am on ao3. Publishing is my least favorite part btw.

See you tomorrow for chap 3 and do lemme know what you think and drop a kudos if you liked it pleeeaseeeee

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Now

Day three in the cottage is quieter. They eat breakfast separately: Ilya in the kitchen, and Shane takes his avocado and egg sandwich to the outdoor dining area. After breakfast, he hides away at the lake, toes dipped in the cold water while Ilya exerts himself in the gym. They cross paths briefly in the kitchen later while Shane makes himself a salad.

Ilya calls him a rabbit again before leaving with a plate of microwaved pizza. Shane eats outside, staring out at the lake. It's so quiet that he can hear his own thoughts. He does not want to hear them. In the distance, a loon calls. Shane cups his hands over his lips and returns the call, nostalgic. He misses his parents. They must be worried about him. He's never gone more than a day without speaking to them. But he also feels quite liberated here, away from all responsibilities and the expectations placed on him.

A normal boring life, as Ilya once said. Ilya, who is so close and yet so far away. Shane twists his neck, hoping to catch a glimpse of his fiancé's shadow through the glass walls. He doesn't have to look far. Ilya is pressed against a window, staring out. He startles and stumbles away as soon as Shane turns around, tripping and tumbling to the floor with expletives flying from his lips.

Shane doubles over with laughter. He laughs as he rushes inside to make sure Ilya is okay. Ilya is fine but he's still seated on the floor glaring as if it personally offended him. "Are you hurt?" He asks, crouching.

"The floor hates me."

Shane laughs harder. He hardly ever gets the chance to laugh at Ilya like this. "What were you even doing?"

"Nothing." Ilya flushes. He looks younger like this, pink in the face and avoiding Shane's eyes. "I was just watching the— uhm wolf birds."

"They are called loons."

"Stupid Canadian wolf birds."

"Come on, are you hurt somewhere? Lemme take a look."

Ilya grunts as he stands. "Oh, you are doctor now?"

"Shut up."

"I am fine. Unless you want to kiss it better."

Shane falters. “You kiss it better.” He internally cringes at his retort and can’t fault Ilya for laughing.

**

At night, Ilya doesn’t come to the bedroom. Shane registers his movement around the living room and keeps an ear out for his approach on the wooden steps but it never comes. Shane falls asleep staring at the doorway.

Ilya isn’t in bed when he wakes up either. His side is cold to the touch. Shane sits up. The voices in his head are doing the thing that they do where they summon all the worst possible scenarios. He shakes his head to shut them out and goes to the bathroom. Ilya enters as Shane starts brushing his teeth, wordlessly picking up his brush, putting on paste, and lifting it to his mouth. No ‘good morning, Hollander’ today. They brush side by side, silent except for the scrub of the brush against their teeth. And the roaring of Shane’s heart as he sneaks glances at Ilya in the mirror.

Shane finishes first. Instead of going to the gym, he gets back into bed, biting his nails while he waits for Ilya to exit the bathroom. Two minutes later, Ilya comes out. He walks past Shane like he isn’t there.

“Rozanov.”

He stops at the entrance, leaning his shoulder against the doorway. “Mhmm?”

Shane hesitates. “You uh— didn’t sleep in our bedroom, t-the bedroom.”

His brows shoot up. “Is this a problem?”

“No, of course not. I was wondering if it’s something I did.”

“Oh my God Hollander, you know what is your problem? You think too much.”

“So it’s a yes. What did I do? We didn’t even fight yesterday.”

Ilya sighs loudly, pinching his brows. He stares long at Shane and spits it out. “I did not want to spend another night listening to you crying.”

Shane sits up, defensive. “I don’t cry.”

Ilya shoots him a deadpan stare. “You sleep right next to me. You think I have hearing loss?”

“Okay. Maybe I cried.”

“Maybe?”

“Fine, I cried. It was just a little tear.”

“Little tear,” Ilya repeats in disbelief.

“I thought I was quiet. Sorry. I’ll stop. I didn’t cry last night.”

“Congratulations.”

“Fuck you.”

Ilya sighs again and steps further into the room. He settles beside Shane on the bed, bowing slightly to catch his eyes. “Why did you cry?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Hollander.”

“I don’t know.” He couldn’t possibly tell Ilya that he cries because he misses him even though he’s right here. “Just stress.”

“And yesterday you were not stressed because I was not in bed?” He smiles.

“Shut up. It’s not that. I guess I was too worried about you not joining me to cry.”

“So is good that I did not join you. Hollander, if you’re trying to convince me to sleep with you, you are doing a really bad job.”

“There are better ways to phrase that.”

“Yes.” He chuckles. “But this way made you blush. Okay, let’s make a deal. I will sleep in the bedroom if you do not cry anymore.”

Easy. “Okay.”

“No, Hollander you will have to pinky swear. You are too good at breaking promises.”

Shane frowns. “I’ve never broken a promise.”

“Liar.” Ilya stands and Shane follows him like a moth to a flame. “You tell big lies with your innocent face.”

“Tell me one lie I’ve told.”

“You are the best strawberry smoothie maker in the world. It has been years and you have not made me one yet. What is that if not a liar?” Ilya finally realizes Shane isn’t trailing behind him anymore. He turns around, brows dipping. “Hollander?” He backtracks.

“You remember?” Ilya looks increasingly alarmed by whatever must be going on in Shane’s face. “It’s just— I thought you forgot. About me and— and everything.”

“Hollander, *котенок*,” his thumb brushes Shane’s cheek. It takes everything not to close his eyes and lean into the touch. “You make no sense.”

Shane steps back and lets Ilya’s hand fall off. “I’ll make you a strawberry smoothie.”

“A mean one?”

“Very mean.” Shane could die from happiness. He hasn’t made a smoothie in so long but he puts on a show for Ilya. It’s the first time in a while that Ilya has given him his undivided attention, eyes flickering between Shane’s hands, his eyes, his lips. He fills a glass when he’s done, and slides it across the counter to Ilya. Holds his breath as Ilya raises it to his lips and sips.

Ilya grimaces and quickly covers it with a smile. “Delicious.”

“Oh my God, you hate it.”

“I do not hate.”

Shane dips a finger into the blender and recoils at the taste. He glares at Ilya who is bent over laughing. “It tasted better when I was eleven.”

“I believe you.”

“It must be the strawberries. I grabbed the first one on the shelf because I was in a hurry.”

“To get away from me.”

Ilya is still smiling so Shane says. “And look how that turned out.”

“Mhmm, maybe you cannot get enough of me.” He takes another big gulp of the disgusting smoothie.

“You wish.” Shane doesn’t stare at the bob of Ilya’s Adam’s apple. Or the dart of his tongue to clear a drop on his upper lip. “I don’t think you should be drinking that.”

“You made it to impress me, da?”

“I didn’t make it to impress you.” He totally did.

“I will drink.” He squeezes his eyes tight and gulps the rest down. “Ahhhh.” He exhales. “Refreshing.”

“Gross.”

“You were right about something, you know?”

“What was that?”

“Your smoothie was pretty mean.”

“Shut up.”

He circles the island to stand next to Shane. “And it made me happy.”

“It did?”

“I laughed till I cried. Is not common for me, Hollander. Now move.” He grabs Shane’s shoulders and steers him out of the way. “You had your fun. My turn now. I will make breakfast.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Eh no, no. Just sit and look pretty, hmm?”

Shane is too happy to think of a clever retort. He mounts a stool and hopes to God that he looks pretty as hell just sitting there.

**

Shane is prepared for another day of solitude, but Ilya joins him by the lake after breakfast and challenges him to a freediving competition. Shane jumps at the invitation. They change into swim trunks and wade over to the deeper side of the lake.

“Shane Hollander, are you ready to lose?”

“Nope.”

Shane loses three consecutive times before realizing that Ilya had been cheating. He only goes under when Shane starts to resurface. It ends in a scuffle with Ilya hoisting Shane over his shoulders and dumping him back into the lake. They swim for the rest of the morning, racing to the deck only when they start to feel hungry.

Ilya makes them chicken sandwiches and eats with Shane at the outdoor dining area. It all feels surreal. Today looks like something he could only dare to dream about.

When night falls, Shane retires to the bedroom first. Ilya joins after a few minutes, stripping to his underwear in front of Shane before disappearing into the en-suite.

Shane tries and fails to keep his mind from wandering. It doesn’t help that he remembers the shape of Ilya’s body. The wide expanse of his back and the strength in his legs. He remembers the feel of his skin beneath his touch, rough in places where the scars from Grigori’s abuse abide. Remembers the weight between his legs as Ilya pushed gently into him. The taste of the skin on his shoulder where Shane muffled his pleasure. The bruising grip of his palms as they anchored Shane’s hands above the bed. Shane’s belly tightens at the memory. He bites his lips, fighting the temptation to wrap his fingers around his aching dick.

Ilya exits the bathroom, steam chasing after him like it too can’t get enough. Shane’s gaze follows him and quickly averts when the towel around his waist comes off. He holds his breath, wanting, until the bed dips and Ilya slips under the covers.

“Do not cry today.”

“Shut up, I wasn’t planning to.”

“Goodnight, Hollander.”

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

**

Shane wakes up early the next morning and gets started on breakfast. Ilya has been cooking for them and so he thought he should reciprocate. Maybe show Ilya that he could take care of him. Shane cracks some eggs into the pan, double-checking for shells, and then gets started on their coffee. The machine is one he has never operated before but after some tweaking, he figures it out. It starts fine but a few seconds later, the grinder gets stuck. Shane realizes he overloaded it and starts offloading some coffee beans when the smell of smoke reaches his nose.

He turns around quickly, snatching the pan off the fire and turning the stove off but it's too late. Ilya is standing in the space that separates the kitchen from the living room. Shane takes in his sleep-rumpled appearance— disheveled hair, wrinkled pants— and is torn between hiding his face in embarrassment or walking up to him and kissing the laughter off his lips.

“The coffee maker got jammed.”

“Hollander, you cannot make eggs?”

“I can.”

Ilya advances slowly, hands in his pockets. “This is the second time you tried to cook and failed.”

“I told you it was the strawberries’ fault.”

“Blame poor strawberry who cannot defend herself.”

“Ugh,” Shane groans, hiding his face in his palms. “I wanted to make breakfast because you’ve been cooking since I arrived.”

“Yes, but I like cooking. You eat food made by your chefs.”

“I don’t have chefs. I have a nutritionist and I cook my food by myself.”

“Mixing salad is not cooking.” He makes a dramatic gasp. “Is that why you eat salad like rabbit?”

“I can cook.” Shane can’t even be mad. He’s smiling too widely for someone who’s being made fun of.

“Okay but when we are here...,” Ilya steers him out of the way by his shoulders again. Shane’s skin tingles even after he lets go. “...I will cook. And you, Mister bad chef, will sit down—,”

“And look pretty?”

“Да, веснушки. You are a fast learner.”

Shane watches Ilya to his fill while he cooks. He puts on his usual frown of concentration and mumbles to himself while working. Every few seconds, he looks up and flashes Shane a small smile. Shane's heart grows fonder by the minute, expanding twice in size to accommodate how much he feels for Ilya. Soon, he'll be all heart and no human.

After breakfast, they rope swing into the lake and sunbathe on the deck. Ilya lends Shane his clothes because Shane unfortunately ran out of clean clothes. Before giving them away he makes Shane try them on much to Shane's annoyance.

"Is payment for clothes."

Shane complains but gives in anyway. He's not particularly good at saying no to Ilya. Later, Ilya makes a rice dish he calls plov.

"Mama made good plov." He says as they eat.

"You must miss her a lot."

He nods. "Russia was not nice but it is home. Mama does not get flowers anymore."

"Ilya—,"

"Eat, Hollander." He interrupts with a sniff. "I made you good food." He adds with a lighter tone, knocking Shane's knees under the table.

Shane doesn't push it. "Yeah, you're pretty good."

"Perfect. I am perfect."

Yes, Shane thinks. "Sometimes."

Later when they are both cozy in bed, Shane turns on his side. "Ilya," he whispers.

"Mhm?" He does not look at Shane, face turned to the ceiling.

Shane worries his lips for a few seconds. "Today was nice, right?"

He doesn't answer right away. "It was."

"I had so much fun yesterday and today." Must be the happiest he felt in a minute. "I don't want to walk on eggshells around you anymore. I-I guess what I'm saying is, can we try being friends again?"

Ilya sighs. "Hollander—,"

"Wait," Shane jumps in, nervous. "You don't have to make a decision today. Just take your time. It's obvious that we enjoy each other's company." Ilya finally lies on his side, throwing Shane off by how close together the action brings them. "I m-mean, I do and I hope you do too." He searches Ilya's face. Lingers on his lips. "And I don't know if you remember but I do make a mean strawberry smoothie."

Ilya's face breaks into a slow smile. "The meanest." His voice is so thin that Shane only deduces his words from reading his lips. "Hollander."

"Rozanov," Shane whispers back.

"Shanya."

Shane shuts his eyes. His throat clogs with tears. When he peels back his lids, Ilya falls behind a film of tears. "Ilyusha. Fuck Ilya," he chokes.

"Shhh, Is okay." He brings a hand to Shane's face. Shane covers it with his own. Nuzzles into it. How he misses holding Ilya. A tear rolls down the bridge of his nose into his pillow. Shane catches Ilya's shattered look only for a second before he's getting yanked against his chest.

He hugs Ilya back, burrowing himself closer until they are fitted together from head to toe. Shane cries silently and revels in the comfort that Ilya provides.

"Shhh," Ilya soothes. "No crying in bed, remember? You have broken another promise."

"Not the same." Shane snuffles. "These are tears of joy." He pulls back slightly, surprised to see that Ilya has also been crying.

"Allergy," Ilya says, sniffing. "Your hair got into my eyes. Too much product. Made me cry."

"Oh yeah?" Shane rubs his hair over Ilya's face. He laughs as Ilya pretends to fight him off while his other hand holds him close by the waist.

When they're done joshing around, Ilya settles over Shane like they used to when they were younger. It feels like home. It is everything. The cold metal of Ilya's crucifix feels like a brand on his skin. Shane wishes it were.

"Shanya."

"Ilyusha." He smiles when Ilya's grin widens.

"Being your friend—," his thumb strokes the corner of Shane's eyes. "I do not know how."

"We'll learn together. It was so good before. You remember, right?"

He swallows. Nods. "I do."

"So let's try. I'll try harder. I'll go to your parties and kiss girls with you."

"No Hollander—,"

"I'll wear those ridiculous patterned shirts you like."

"Is designer."

"I can communicate in whatever language you're comfortable with."

“You can speak Mandarin?” He jokes.

“I’m a fast learner,” Shane replies seriously. There’s no language barrier he wouldn’t bridge for Ilya. “Just name it. Anything. Anything to make you happy.”

Ilya’s face squeezes. He hides it in Shane’s chest. They stay like that for a while.

**

Then

Twenty-two years old

Rose drags Shane along to at least one party whenever she’s in town.

“You’re too young and too cute to rot away in your apartment.” She argues.

“But I like my apartment.”

“You won’t find a boyfriend by hiding in your room.”

“I don’t need a boyfriend. Engaged, remember? I’m not allowed to be seen with anyone in a ‘suggestive manner’.”

“Allowed? Oh my God. Now you must come with me. Shane, the guy has you blocked!”

He groans. “Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t box yourself for a man who doesn’t give a fuck about you.” She tugs on his arm.

“Come on. Tonight, we get drunk and you meet Miles.”

**

The bar is noisy as usual. Light strobes spin from the ceiling. Electronic music spills from the speakers. And overpriced alcohol sloshes in bottles.

Shane elects to sit back at their table while Rose, Hayden, and Jackie tear up the dancefloor. Every other second, Rose stops to glance at Shane as though he would disappear if not attended to. He could and has done it before but surprisingly, he’s not so desperate to escape today.

The VIP section of the bar is chill and no drunk women are trying to climb into his lap. Believe it or not, it has happened more than twice. Shane plays with the label on his second beer of the night as he watches his friends. In fact, he watches others too. Inebriated people are quite fascinating. That’s how his eyes fall on none other than Ilya Rozanov.

The noise from the bar suddenly reduces to a hum and his eyes register nothing farther than two feet away from where Ilya is lounging in a seat, flanked by Svetlana and the guy he appeared in the Russian news with, Sasha.

Shane distinctly recalls his face because he spent a long time analyzing the photos of the pair. He would stare at them while wishing that it were him in Sasha's place. He wanted to be the friend who lived in the same city as Ilya. Someone who spoke in his mother tongue. Someone he could take along to parties. And though he wasn't a fan of the paparazzi, he wanted to be photographed with Ilya with headlines that suggested they had a lot of fun together.

Surrounding Ilya now are the two people he abandoned Shane for. There are others at the table with them but the three seem removed, lost in their own world, chatting and laughing. Shane can tell from their gestures and the movement of their lips that they are speaking in Russian. Sasha laughs, leaning into Ilya's side. Ilya allows it. Shane's head spins but he doesn't think the beer has anything to do with it. His heartburn flares up. He takes a swig of his beer hoping to quell it.

Ilya says something that makes Svetlana laugh, flicking her hair from her face. Shane wonders what must have been said. Does Ilya ever speak of him? Does he remember they were friends once upon a time? Best friends? Does he remember the taste of his lips or has it been diluted with the taste of red lipstick? They held each other through many sorrows and transitory joys. Does he remember? Or is Shane just a blot in his memories?

Sasha fishes out the cigarette from between Ilya's fingers and pulls on it. He breathes out a cloud of smoke, briefly obscuring Shane's view of Ilya. When the cloud settles, Ilya is staring back at him. His blue eyes are completely dark in the bar's shitty lighting. Shane shifts in his seat and wets his lips, breath quickening. Svetlana and Sasha are still talking but Ilya isn't watching them anymore. He leans forward, as if wanting to leave his seat and Shane's belly tightens in anticipation.

"Hey, handsome." Rose drops in next to Shane.

Ilya freezes, gaze flitting between Shane and Rose. He settles back against the backrest, rubbing his nose. Then with his eyes still glued to Shane's he throws back the last of his vodka and pulls Svetlana into his lap. She goes to him easily, spine curving into his touch. It looks intimate. Familiar. Like they've done this several times. Shane knows he should look away but his eyes are tethered to Ilya's, a magnetic force between them.

He swallows painfully as Ilya's palms rest flat on her back. It feels like a stab to the heart when his lips move over the crown of her ears. Rose is saying something. She has been saying so many things as a matter of fact but Shane has barely registered a word. He's lost in the torture that is Ilya Rozanov. His personal hell. He has given Ilya so much of his heart. And each time, it is beaten black and blue and lobbed back at him. Unwanted.

A figure blocks Shane's view, effectively dragging him from the edge of irreparable despair.

"You must be Shane Hollander," the man says. "I'm Miles."

Shane borrows a smile from memory. Plasters it on. "Hello, Miles." He hunches up to make room for the newcomer.

Miles sits, eyes twinkling. He's handsome but Shane can hardly acknowledge that, blinded, after staring at the sun for so long. "The elusive Shane Hollander. I've heard so much about

you.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“I’ll tell you if you dance with me.”

“Oh,” he shakes his head. “I am— I can’t dance.”

“I’ll show you how.”

Shane would do anything to never have to look at Ilya and Svetlana again so he rises and offers Miles a hand who takes it and follows him to the dance floor. Miles is a good dancer. He leads and Shane follows. He talks and Shane listens. Shane laughs at whatever he believes is intended as a joke. He plays a part that takes so much from him that he is exhausted before midnight.

When he begs to leave, Miles offers to share a ride with him. He’s too polite to refuse. He slips on his mask again until the Uber drops him off at his apartment.

He goes up to his room on autopilot. Steps out of his clothes and into the showers. He scrubs his skin until it’s pink and raw and falls into bed. He shuts his eyes to trick his mind into stopping working. His mind is not easily tricked. It replays in reels what it saw in the club. Svetlana. Ilya. Sasha.

The most pathetic part of this is that Shane wouldn’t mind being the Sasha of the group. Hell, he wouldn’t mind being one of the faceless people at Ilya’s table if it meant having his best friend back by his side.

Shane’s phone rings. He grabs it to silence it but stops when Ilya’s name flashes across his screen. He hesitates only a second before sliding the green button.

“Ilya.”

“Shane.” Not Hollander. A small victory that Shane cannot celebrate. “You are alone?”

“What do you want?”

“You have boyfriend now?” Shane catches the slight slur of his words.

“You’re drunk, Ilya. Where are you?”

“In bed. In my house. You are an engaged man, you know that?”

Shane sighs, rubbing at his eyes. He’s stripped bare and exhausted from the night’s events.

“Can we not do this today?”

“You are with him now?”

“I don’t think that’s your business.”

Ilya makes a sound similar to a whine. “I saw his face, Shanya. I could do something very stupid.”

“When have you not been stupid?”

“I could find him. I could make him leave my husband alone.”

“Look Rozanov, I won’t tarnish your family’s reputation or whatever, okay? I’ll be discreet if I have to.”

“Hollander, this is much serious than that. You must not let him touch you. Is-Is bad for partnership.”

“Who is that?” Another voice joins the conversation. A Russian voice.

“Are you with your girlfriend right now? Fuck, Ilya, why do you do this to— to me? How dare you talk about partnership when there’s a woman in your bed!?”

“Not in bed.”

“Ilya, give me the phone.” The Russian voice says again. Shane hates her so much. He hates Ilya and he hates himself. There seems to be a tussle for the phone. Ilya seems to have lost because Shane hears him groaning.

“Is not so wrong to talk to my husband, no?” He moans. His girlfriend laughs and calls him an idiot before the line disconnects.

As expected, Shane is blocked again by morning. And yet, his heart breaks still.

**

Twenty-five years old

Shane Hollander hates himself. He affirms this as he checks his reflection in the mirror for the nth time. Countless clothes are strewn across his closet floor in his hunt for the perfect outfit for the occasion. The occasion is a party thrown by his parents for him and his fiancé/tormentor, Ilya Rozanov. This brings him back to why he hates himself. There’s some part of him that believes Ilya would hate him less if he did something different with himself. That maybe one of these changes would be the thing that finally gets Ilya to look at him again.

Today that thing is a silk shirt with an intricate waist draping and a collar that plunges to his belly button. Shane does not recognize himself. In fact, he knows who he is looking at in the mirror. Sasha wore the same shirt two months ago to some charity gala with Ilya and Svetlana. Shane came across the photo while surfing the internet at 2 am. His eyes immediately honed in on Ilya’s hand around Sasha’s waist. It rested right where the draping began. He zoomed in further, biting the inside of his cheeks hard enough to draw blood.

Ilya was smiling. So was Sasha. He must like Ilya’s hand around his waist, Shane thought. Ilya must really like the shirt so much. It wrinkled between his firm grip on Sasha’s waist. At

2:30 am, Shane ordered the same shirt online in the same color.

Now, looking at himself in it, he feels stupid for wanting Rozanov's approval even after all this time. He is disgusted by his wantonness. Frustrated, he pulls the shirt over his head. Dumps it into the sink and opens the faucet so he doesn't change his mind and put it back on.

He returns to his closet and picks out something he would wear. Black tailored pants, a black button-up, and a black jacket. It's simple. It's him. And sadly, that is the problem.

He arrives at the hotel a little after nine. Groans when he realizes the car before him is Rozanov's. He exits his car just as Shane does, dressed in a dark brown suit with the top three buttons of his shirt undone. His curls are slicked back with gel which pronounces his facial features. Shane catches himself staring and quickly looks away, handing his keys over to one of the many valets.

"A jeep, Hollander?" Ilya leans in to whisper. He smells of calabrian bergamot, cedarwood, and a hint of nicotine.

"You should stop smoking." He retorts as they fall in step. Shane has gone through this so many times but he flinches a little when camera flashes go off.

"I had just one."

"You always have just one."

"Because is truth."

They pause for pictures and Rozanov's hand comes around Shane's waist. Tugs him a little closer. They pose for a couple of pictures like this. Shane forgets all his practice poses because all he can focus on is the hand on his waist. It's over too soon with Ilya's hand trailing across his back before falling off.

They enter the hall to a standing ovation and more camera flashes. Ilya plays the gentleman by leading Shane toward their designated table. Their families are already seated. David is trying to talk to a disinterested Grigori while Alexei watches the crowd like it's his first time in Canada. Yuna smiles sweetly at them. Ilya sits next to her, leaving Shane to sit between him and Alexei.

"She's my mother," Shane grits.

"Will be mine soon."

Shane has no rebuttal for that so he just frowns. His frown turns real when he catches sight of Sasha and Svetlana at a table too close for his liking. They wave enthusiastically at Ilya and then Svetlana shamelessly blows him a kiss. Shane frowns at his lap, vision spotting. His jaw clenches to the point of pain. Of course, they are here. Why did he think they wouldn't come? Ilya will likely ditch their party midway and go with them to a different party. One without Shane. He'll be photographed with them. He will smile while he holds Sasha's waist. And

everyone will talk about how Ilya's fiancé is not intriguing enough to make him stay at a party organized for him.

A hand lands on Shane's knee stopping his descent into panic. Rozanov. He squeezes once and leaves it there. Shane stares at the hand and then at Rozanov who is looking straight ahead with a smile on his face.

The hand stays on Shane's leg throughout the introductory speeches and stays there until Yuna nudges them to go mingle with others. Shane doesn't know half of the people around but he recognizes their names and their kids. He's been mentioned in the same sentence with them for years, it would be crazy not to know them.

Somewhere along the way, Ilya disappears from his side, leaving Shane to finish touring the crowd alone. When all hands have been shaken, he doesn't know what to do with himself. Everyone seems to be having a good time at this party thrown in his honor. The dancers are moving slowly to soft piano notes. Others are standing in clusters, champagne flutes held between their fingers and gossip on their lips.

Rose is in Cuba filming another movie, Hayden is home with a heavily pregnant Jackie, and his fiancé would rather talk to Sasha and Svetlana than stay by his side.

Svetlana looks up and catches his eyes. She smiles and says something to Ilya. Ilya turns around before Shane can even begin to look away. All three are staring at him now. Should he wave or smile? Shane does both and regrets it. Svetlana and Sasha smile back but Ilya faces his friends again. Svetlana's hands fly as she says something to Ilya. Shane does not have a good enough view of her face to read her lips.

Ilya suddenly turns to Shane again. He takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders before beginning his approach as if talking to Shane is a chore.

"Hollander."

"Rozanov."

"Come here often?"

Shane rolls his eyes. "Did your girlfriend force you to talk to me?"

He doesn't respond to that. Instead, he says, "I do not see Rose and the other one around."

"She's filming. Hayden has a name, okay? He's with Jackie. She's pregnant."

"Again?"

He scowls. "This is her first pregnancy."

"So no Rose and other minion so you stand here looking like a beaten puppy?"

"Kicked puppy. And I don't look like a kicked puppy."

“Ah true. A sad kitten.”

“I don’t look like anything.”

“You give me a bad look, Hollander. People will think I do not take care of my husband—,”

“Fiancé.”

“—they will think I make you sad. Hmm, веснушки?” He lifts two flutes from a passing waiter and hands one to Shane. “Drink.”

Shane takes it begrudgingly but follows Ilya’s command. “Thanks,” he mutters after a sip.

They stand quietly for a while. Shane thinks Ilya is about to leave him again but he eases Shane’s glass from his fingers and places it next to his own on a nearby table. Then without warning, takes Shane’s now empty hands and draws him close. Shane fumbles for a second before gripping onto Ilya’s shoulders.

“Hollander move,” Ilya says against his ear.

“You know I can’t dance.” He whines even as he starts moving.

“I saw you dancing with Miles.”

“God, Ilya, it’s been years and it was just one dance.”

“Hmmm. Nothing after that?”

“No, nothing after that.”

Ilya’s hands crawl under Shane’s jacket to hold his waist. Shane swallows a gasp, fingers tightening on Ilya’s shoulders.

“Jacket is bulky,” Ilya says.

“Oh.”

“You are nervous.”

“I’m not.”

“You are shaking, Hollander. Is this how you react to everyone’s touch or just mine?”

“E-everyone?”

“People you fuck.” Ilya reacts quickly, holding Shane firmly against his body as Shane starts to pull away. “Stay, дорогой.”

“Ilya.” They are barely dancing now, just pressed together from chest to thighs.

“Tell me.” His lips skim Shane’s lobe.

“I-I haven’t.”

“Haven’t?”

“I haven’t fucked anyone... yet.” Then he adds because he doesn’t want Ilya to make fun of him. “I will soon. I just— I’m waiting for the right moment.”

Ilya pulls away to watch his face. He searches Shane’s eyes for a second and then holds him back against his sturdy chest, swearing underbreath. “You’re not lying to me?”

“No.”

“Come to me tonight.” His voice sounds lower. Rougher.

“W-what?”

“I booked the penthouse for the night. Come drink with me and my friends.”

“Svetlana and Sasha?”

“They are my only friends, no?”

Shane’s heart tightens. *No*, he wants to scream, *I’m your friend too*. “Right.”

“Will you come?”

Across the room, Shane finds said friends dancing carelessly with people they probably met today. If Shane says no, Ilya might never invite him to anything again. Is this not what he always wanted? To be someone Ilya could have fun with, to be one of the people who made Ilya happy?

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good, котенок.”

**

Shane makes his way up to the condo thirty minutes after the party ends. He’s welcomed at the door by a very ebullient Sasha who throws an arm around his neck and pulls him inside. Svetlana has lost her shoes and is dancing sultrily behind a home bar. Ilya is seated on a couch, jacket discarded and the remaining buttons on his shirt have lost their function.

“Я нашла твоего мужа, Илюша.”

“Осторожно, он неприкосновенен.”

Sasha releases Shane and holds his hands up. “Прости, черт возьми.” He takes another look at Shane and slinks off to join Svetlana.

“Hollander.” Ilya sets his vodka glass down. “You came.”

“You invited me so,” he looks down at himself. “Here I am.”

“Mhmm,” Ilya rises slowly. Closes in on Shane like he doesn’t want to spook him. He stops only when they’re so close that Shane can see the tiniest mole on his skin. “You are still nervous.” Not a question.

“I guess.”

“You are scared I will touch you?”

Shane shakes his head. “I’m scared you won’t.” Not with Svetlana around.

His honesty seems to throw Ilya off. He makes a face Shane only remembers seeing on eighteen-year-old Ilya, broken over Grigori destroying Irina’s things. “You want me to touch you?”

Shane nods. *Please*. “Yes.”

“Hollander.” Ilya reaches for his face but doesn’t touch it. He drops his hand and steps back and Shane wants to weep.

He curses his forwardness. Two glasses of champagne and the feel of Ilya’s hand on his waist and Shane thought he could finally have this. He stands shell-shocked as Ilya crosses over to Svetlana. Shane bites his lips and looks for an escape. The front door seems so far away now. He turns into the next corner instead, past a bedroom and into a bathroom.

He grips the vanity and forces out a breath, eyes stinging. His reflection in the mirror is lamentable. His clothes feel scratchy against his skin. Should he have worn the silk shirt? He lengthens his spine as another person enters, thumbing away the tears on the edge of his eyelids.

“Shane.”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

He looks so lost. “Get what?”

“You don’t want me.” Shane makes a sweeping motion over himself and Ilya follows his hand. “Sorry, I got carried away by the invitation and thought—,” he trails off, breathing through his nose to fight his tears.

“Hollander.” Ilya steps further into the bathroom and grabs his face with one hand, grip tight enough to leave a mark and draws him into a kiss. Shane gasps on contact, locking his arms around Ilya’s neck and kissing him back with the same fervor. His lips feel just as Shane remembers them. Firm and addictive.

Shane has wanted this for so long. Has lost his mind waiting for Ilya to touch him again. He goes willingly as Ilya pushes him against the vanity, grabbing the underside of his thigh and lifting him onto it. Shane's legs wrap around him immediately, swallowing the exhale that pours from Ilya's lips and arching into the firm grip of his hips.

"Pretty," Ilya murmurs, nose pressed to Shane's skin. "So pretty, Shanya. Let me suck your dick."

Shane can only nod frantically. He misses the heat of Ilya's skin when he pulls away. Pants in anticipation as the buttons of his fly come off. Ilya untucks his shirt and holds the hem up to Shane's lips. Shane opens his mouth and takes it.

"Good boy."

Shane whines around the fabric. Lifts his hips to aid Ilya with pulling his pants and underwear down. He shudders at the feel of air on his dick, bucking up to feel something.

"You are pretty everywhere." Ilya praises, pressing a kiss to Shane's abdomen. Then without ceremony swallows down Shane's dick. He throws his head back against the mirror, moans muffled by the shirt in his mouth and hands fisted into Ilya's hair. Ilya bobs his head, wet heat enveloping Shane's dick. He doesn't have to do much for Shane's belly to tighten.

Shane tries to warn him but is too late. He's spilling into Ilya's mouth, who holds him down and sucks him off through his orgasm. Ilya smiles as he comes up, tugging the shirt from Shane's mouth and kissing him.

It's the hottest thing ever, tasting himself on Ilya. He inhales sharply as he's lifted off the vanity. Ilya steers them back into the bedroom and falls into the bed with him. He crawls over Shane, smiling, gold chain glittering in the dim light.

Shane searches his eyes, fighting a smile of his own. "What's funny?"

"I did not think you would come so quick."

"Fuck off." Shane's voice comes out as nothing more than a whisper, drunk on his orgasm and the prominent press of Ilya's cock against his belly. "I want to suck your dick, please."

"Hmm," Ilya caresses his cheek. Kisses his lips plumper. "I want your ass, Hollander." He breathes. "Will you let me fuck you?"

He suppresses a shudder and nods. Shane remembers the following events in snippets; Ilya opening him up with his tongue and then his thick fingers. Their strangled breaths filling the room. The tears behind his eyes as Ilya eases into him. The feeling of fullness. His grip on Ilya's shoulders. His tears, begging Ilya to give him more. More of himself, more of his soul.

Endearments pour from Ilya's lips when they aren't attached to a part of Shane's body. He says Shane's name in breathless whispers as if Shane is the one to apotheosize.

Ilya makes love like a god. Greek and Roman. Eros and Inuus. He checks in from time to time. "Are you okay?" Between kisses. "Still okay?" While thrusting deep inside Shane, his

face pressed into the pillows.

Shane's soul finds its Shangri-la as he comes only from Ilya's cock relentlessly hitting his prostate. Ilya fucks him through his orgasm, spilling into Shane shortly after.

Ilya falls on top of him, offloading his entire weight just the way Shane likes it. Shane winces as he pulls out after a moment.

It's quiet. Then, "We didn't use a condom."

"What do you think?" Ilya slips two fingers into Shane's ass, pushing back the cum dripping out. "That you will get pregnant?"

He squirms, turning around to face Ilya. "Shut up."

Ilya takes his lips in a kiss that ends prematurely because they are both smiling too widely. He pulls back to catch Shane's eyes. "Don't worry. I will take care of babies."

"And me?"

"I said babies, Shanya. You and the one in your belly. But you are always number one baby."

"Shut up, I'm not pregnant." But wouldn't that be something?

"Ah so there is only one baby here, yes?"

"Mhmm."

Ilya laughs. "I will take care of you, moya lyubov. But first, we will shower together. I will fuck you again. We will eat and then we will sleep, yes?"

"Looks like you got it all figured out already."

Ilya hugs him. "I have waited so long for this. I do not want you to ever leave my bed ever again."

**

Shane stays awake as Ilya sleeps beside him, softly snoring. There's too much that needs immediate attention. Too many problems that need solving. After about an hour of thorough pondering, he devises a plan that could be beneficial to all parties involved.

"Ilya." He pets Ilya's hair to rouse him.

"Shanya?" Ilya grumbles, reaching up blindly to tug Shane closer. "Whatsit?" He climbs onto Shane. Kisses along his belly to his chest, teeth catching slightly on his nipple before sucking hickies up his neck and his jaw.

Shane closes his eyes contentedly, basking in Ilya's adoration. "This feels good."

“You want again?” He whispers against the corner of Shane’s lip and slides his tongue into Shane’s mouth as he opens up to respond. Shane kisses back without hesitation, grabbing the sides of Ilya’s face to keep him exactly where he wants him as he feasts eagerly at his lips.

The pressure of Ilya’s erection against his thigh kicks him out of the lustful stupor. “Wait,” he gasps. “Wait Ilya, we need to talk first.”

Ilya pinches his nipple and bites on his bottom lip. “What about?”

“It’s serious.”

Ilya leans away then, brows curved in. Shane can see the walls going up behind his eyes. “What, Hollander?”

“So I was thinking about how to make this work.”

“This.”

“Our— situation. I think we should open our marriage.” Ilya’s nostrils flare as his lips flatten into a straight line. “Hear me out, please. This way, you can be with whoever you want and I can be with whoever I want.”

Ilya stares for a long time, so many thoughts running behind his eyes. “You have someone you like.” Is what he concludes.

“No, no. I mean, I-I don’t have anyone I’m in love with but I could find someone in the future? That I liked. It doesn’t have to be serious. I could—,” He trails off.

Ilya’s hold had been gradually loosening on Shane. Now, he fully lets Shane go and falls against his pillow with his forearm over his eyes. “No.” It’s the most emphatic whisper Shane has ever heard.

“No?”

“No. I do not want it.”

Shane understands it for what it means. *I don’t want to try.* “You’re such a fucking asshole, Ilya.” Just like that, his happiness disappears. “How long will you keep this up?”

Ilya throws the sheets off and vacates the bed in his naked glory. “It’s late, Hollander.” He throws on a robe. “You should leave.”

Shane is beyond heartbreak. He’s filled with anger he has never felt before. Bitterness from the culmination of everything he’s dealt with rolls into a ball and settles heavily on his chest. “God, how do you make it so convincing? Why do I fall for your shit every time?” He finds his underwear on the carpet where Rozanov sent it flying two hours ago and pulls it on. “Was this the goal? Fuck me and run back to your fucking girlfriend?”

“Of course, Hollander plays the victim again!” Ilya’s English is near perfect but his accent is as prominent as his anger. “You think you are blameless? Shane Hollander, too pure for

Rozanov.”

“Oh fuck you. You can justify your actions with these excuses but it won’t change the fact that you’re an asshole. A fucking user!”

“If I am asshole, why are you here!?”

“Because you fucking invited me! You seduced me with the pet names and the touches and I’m such an idiot for falling for them!”

“We are both idiots, no!?” Ilya’s voice is shaking, eyes shining with tears. “You should leave.”

“Why? Is it because of Svetlana?”

“Not Sveta. Do not blame her. It is you.”

“Fuck you! What did I do that was so wrong!?” The tears he’s been trying to control tether dangerously close to his eyelids. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I kissed you before. I’m sorry for tonight! I’m sorry for everything. I just—,” tears run down his cheeks. “I wanted to make you happy. I just want you to be happy.”

Ilya rubs his eyes. “Hollander, do not make this harder than it already is.”

“It’s hard because of you. You were my best friend, Ilyusha!”

“Do not call me that!”

“I hate you!”

“You think I do not know that? You torture me!” He’s red in the face, veins popping out. “I am terrified by the idea of spending the rest of my life with you!! You hate me? I feel much worse for you, Hollander!”

Shane cannot see past his tears. He crouches by the bed and sobs into the sheets he just made love in. His heartburn returns with a vengeance. Shane clutches at his chest in an ailing attempt to soothe his poor heart. He rises to his feet, wobbly, and picks up his pants. He would stay here all night if he were to wait until his tears subsided. He pulls on his shirt, missing a few buttons.

He pauses and glances at Ilya. He looks almost as broken as Shane feels. Shane nods once and leaves the room.

“Hollander.”

Shane walks on.

“Shanya, please.”

He doesn't stop, held together by what little pride he has left. He's in the lobby when he realizes that he left his jacket behind. He keeps walking.

It's the last time he sees Ilya until the day of their wedding.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!! I'll be updating the rest of this back to back so stay tuned. Comments and kudos appreciated, don't be stingy with them my thumbs literally hurt

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Then

Nineteen years old

“If you love somebody, let them go. For if they return, they were always yours.”

These words became gospel to Shane. He believed that with time, Ilya would indubitably return to him. He couldn't conceive a reality where Ilya was anything but his. However, as time passed, he was forced to accept the truth. Ilya had slipped out of his reach forever.

With this new perspective, Shane falls back on snapshots of Ilya from bloodthirsty tabloids. He relies on blurry zoomed-in videos to find a smile or catch his words from the movement of his lips.

In Shane's dreams, he's in a field with grass as tall as himself. The needles are pointy and their color, a lush green. It's breathtaking. And yet the blades bind him, squeezing until he's choking on air. Not far off, Ilya stands with his new friends. Shane calls out to him but he doesn't respond. He leaves Shane to die at the hands of the beautiful blades of grass.

Shane attempts a couple of things to feel connected to Ilya again. He sprays his sheets with Ilya's favourite brand of perfume. Smokes cigarettes to chase the faint taste of nicotine on his tongue. But the only thing that sticks is the Russian lessons.

It starts with online classes twice a week for a month. After the first four weeks, Shane hires an in-person tutor. Miss Tamara is a petite, middle-aged woman with the patience of a monk. She makes learning much less cumbersome, carefully guiding Shane through complex grammatical rules and correcting his Cyrillic when needed.

“You didn't tell me you were learning Russian,” Yuna says when she comes home early and meets Tamara on her way out.

“I told dad. No big deal.” He shrugs.

“That's amazing, honey. I'm sure Ilya will appreciate it.”

“Well, I'm marrying the guy so I might as well.” Yuna regards him with sad eyes. Shane sighs. “Mom, please don't start.”

“You were so close before.”

Shane is fed up with having this conversation. Yuna has been wondering why meetings are tense now. Why Ilya doesn't talk to him anymore. Shane himself would like to know the answer to that. “And now we aren't. Please drop it.”

Later that night, he comes across a headline that features Ilya's face. He is so happy to identify two words of Cyrillic without struggling. He goes to tell someone about it. When Shane opens Ilya's chat, his last unanswered message stares back at him.

He goes to bed sad.

**

Twenty-five years old

Shane is not new to heartbreak. Except this one feels like his first time. His tears fall unceasingly and the simplest tasks take a herculean effort. He ends up crouched before the toilet bowl, retching with tears stinging his eyes whenever he dares to ingest anything. His body wages a war against him for trying to live when it wants to wilt and die.

Once upon a time, Shane was happy to be Ilya's betrothed. He hoped that once they got married, proximity would remind Ilya of how good they were together, that he would eventually learn to love him. These aspirations turned to dust as he walked out of Ilya's penthouse.

When he thinks he might feel better, Ilya's words ring in his mind, merciless, and he shatters all over again. Moving on from Ilya Rozanov is as easy as catching one's own shadow. How does one move on from the only love they've ever known?

Ilya was his first friend, his first best friend, his first love, his first kiss, his first lover, and his first heartbreak.

"Honey?" Yuna raps on his door. It's times like this that Shane regrets giving her the code to his apartment. "We've been trying to reach you for a week." Shane bites his lips, afraid that speaking would engender tears. Yuna knocks again. "Are you okay? Honey, I know you're in there. I can hear you."

"Fine." He says eventually. "I ate something bad."

"May I come in?"

"No please. I just want to be alone."

She hesitates. Sighs. "Okay. But you need to get in touch with the wedding planners. Only Ilya has been attending meetings."

"I'm fine with anything." His voice wobbles. "I trust his judgment."

"Honey—,"

"I'm fine, Mom."

After Yuna's departure, having resigned himself to a life of misery, Shane breaks down again, crying until his throat turns sore.

Now

It's eight in the morning when Shane and Ilya wake up the next day. They don't rush to leave the bed, huddled under the sheets with Ilya's arm around him and his chin resting in the crook of Shane's shoulder. They eventually, reluctantly, get up sometime around 9 am. Routinely brush their teeth side by side and then proceed to the gym together.

Ilya makes it into a little competition about who can run faster and lift heavier. Shane beats him in cardio and Ilya triumphs in weights.

When they are done, Shane's muscles are sore, which feels like an inconsequential problem against the bigger obstacle of being so fucking turned on. He can't for the life of him get Ilya's hefty breaths and sweat-slicked abs out of his mind. The way he grunts with each lift. The flex of his pecs. Or the veins bulging in his arms.

It's quite frustrating as they've reverted to old habits of being extremely touchy with each other. Shane assumed that having Ilya's attention would assuage his neediness. It only heightens it. He savors every brush of their fingers together. The lock of their gazes over the rim of their coffee mugs at the breakfast bar. The wet slide of their skin in the lake when Ilya plasters his entire front against Shane's back. It's too much and at the same time not enough.

Ilya is lounging on the couch in the living room, legs wide apart, reminiscent of the night in the penthouse. The television is playing an old horror movie on the only channel it's been able to connect to since their arrival. They could probably fix that by moving the antenna but neither could be bothered. They only keep it on for background noise anyway.

Unlike that night in the penthouse, Ilya's lips stretch into a smile when Shane makes his presence known. He pats the space beside him, eyeing Shane from the crown of his head to his feet. "You did not model this one for me, Hollander."

Shane glances down at his shirt. It's another one of Ilya's. "Sorry, your modeling fees couldn't cover this." He flops down onto the couch.

"Modeling fees?"

Shane stretches out and lays his head in Ilya's lap, purring when long fingers sink into his hair. "Mhmm." Ilya looks more gorgeous upside down.

"You would model for me if I paid you?"

"Why do I get the feeling you're about to pull out your card?"

"I am, Hollander. You dangle a worm before a fish."

"Who taught you that?"

Ilya looks proud. "Sveta said it once. Very confusing. I looked it up."

“Oh.”

Ilya's frown disappears when he looks back at Shane. “Hey.” A small pat to Shane's cheek surprisingly grounds him. “Shanya?”

“Mhm?”

“Stop thinking. Give me smile.” He leans down, pressing his lips to Shane's forehead.

It's a quick kiss but it loosens the tight cords in Shane's belly. He doesn't have to fake the smile that overcomes him. “One more please.” Shane jokes and is surprised when Ilya complies. It takes a lot of self restraint to not wind his arms around Ilya's neck and jerk him down for a proper kiss.

“Okay?”

“O-one more?”

Ilya laughs and obliges, lingering this time. Shane's foolish heart dances in his chest. He thinks he can do this. If he can have Ilya in this capacity, nothing else should matter. Not even Svetlana.

**

On the sixth day in the cottage, Ilya vanishes and reappears just as Shane's panic starts to set in. He dives into the lake before Shane can question the dark stains on his cheeks and shirt. Then lures him into the water by calling him a chicken.

Afterwards, they lie back on the deck and stare at the stars twinkling in the dark sky. Ilya lies about seeing a shooting star and tells Shane to make a wish. Shane shuts his eyes and wishes that they would stay in the cottage forever.

“What did you wish for?” Ilya asks.

“Hmmm,” he pretends to think. “A richer husband?”

“Oh, I am not enough?”

“Not really.”

Ilya reaches over and roughly hauls Shane over his lap. Shane's only protest is a surprised sound before recovering balance with his palms pressed flat across Ilya's chest.

“What are you doing, Ilyusha!?” He sounds winded. Ilya's heart beats an unnatural rhythm against his palm. Any moment from now, Shane's dick might see this entire situation as an excuse to get up.

“You want better husband? Like who? Miles?”

“Oh fuck off.” Shane’s attempt to climb off is halted by Ilya’s hands on his waist, anchoring him in place. He could escape if he wanted to. But he doesn’t want to. “Are you ever gonna let me live that down?”

“You were dancing, Shanya. In front of your husband.”

“Fiancé,” Shane corrects in a murmur. “You danced too.” He swallows. “With others.”

“Is not the same. Svetlana is my friend.”

“Miles is my friend.” He isn’t but it’s worth seeing the moue of Ilya’s face. “He would’ve been at our wedding.”

“Is good thing I ran away.”

“Yes?”

“Wedding would have been canceled anyway.” He pinches Shane’s side, drawing a laugh out of him. As his laughter fades, he finds Ilya just staring up at him with eyes more luminous than the constellation above.

“What?” Shane asks, self-conscious.

One of Ilya’s hands wraps around Shane’s, thumb rubbing circles into the inside of his wrist. “I missed you, you know?”

Shane bites his upper lip. Shakes his head. “No.” Ilya did nothing to indicate he ever thought of Shane. “I was convinced you forgot about us.”

“I tried to. I tried so hard, солнышко but I remember every moment.”

Shane smiles through the ache in his heart. “Every moment?”

“Every second.”

“Even the day you tried to puncture the tires of our rental so we wouldn’t leave Russia?” It was a foolproof plan. They were thirteen and Ilya was so certain that it was the solution to their distance problem.

“I remember.”

“Even when you made me read Shakespeare to you and laughed at every single word I said?”

Ilya laughs as if remembering the exact moment. “Funnier than normal English. Yes, Shanya, I remember.”

It’s quiet for a while as they stare at each other. The wind blows colder but Shane is engulfed by Ilya’s warmth. “I thought you’d left.” He confesses quietly. “This morning, I thought you left me.”

“I am right here.”

“I know but when I couldn’t find you, I thought I did something wrong again.”

“Oh, Shanya. Come’ere.” He brings Shane down and wraps him in his arms. “Do not cry.”

“I’m not crying.” He isn’t. He’s a little upset calling back to how he felt this morning but he’s also quite pleased to be in Ilya’s arms.

“Shhh, crybaby.” Ilya pats the back of his head.

“Shut up.”

“I will leave a note if I run away.”

“You’re such an asshole. Let me go.”

“No.” Ilya’s hold around him tightens. “If I run away, you will find me again, da?”

“Da,” Shane whispers, holding back tears.

**

On the ninth day, Shane wakes up back against Ilya’s chest, which is normal for them. Except that now, Ilya’s lips are on his nape, and the hard line of his morning wood is pressed against Shane’s ass. Shane tramples his instinct to push back against it. His attempt to quietly extricate himself from Ilya’s arms wakes him.

“Is too early, Hollander.”

“Your dick is on my ass.”

Ilya moves in a way that suggests he peeks down at his erection. “Is just a cock. You have one.”

“I know that.”

“And you have had this one.”

“Oh my God, Shut up.” Shane makes to leave the bed and yelps as Ilya pulls him back down and wraps him back in his arms.

“Ten more minutes, Hollander. You are better than pillow.”

Shane suppresses a shiver when Ilya nuzzles into his neck. He would turn around if he were braver. Place his lips at the base of Ilya’s neck where his pulse thrums. Slip a knee between his legs to feel the rigid warmth of his erection. But Shane isn’t brave so he closes his eyes and settles in Ilya’s arms.

Later, Shane locks himself in the bathroom and jerks off, crying out Ilya’s name as thick stripes of cum decorate the walls.

**

“We’re running out of groceries,” Shane says at the breakfast bar. Ilya shoves eggs into his mouth with a nonchalant shrug. “We will starve, Rozanov.”

“We have chips.”

“I won’t eat chips. God Ilya, all you brought was Coke and chips.”

“Frozen pizza, bread, and ground beef too.”

“You look so proud of yourself for someone who will run out of eggs in two days.”

“We have chips.”

Shane is unamused. “You planned this for months and brought just chips. How?”

“Not months. Just one. I did not think you would come. I would have brought more rabbit food.” Shane can’t stay mad. And he’s annoyed that Ilya knows this. “We will not starve. I will find a way.”

“By what? Hunting for food like a caveman?”

“Da, your big Russian husband—,”

“Fiancé.”

“— will hunt anything you want. Just name it.”

“I just want some egg whites.”

“That is impossible. You should have said something simpler like— like a boar.”

Shane bursts out laughing. He wants to kiss Ilya so badly. Wants to kiss the proud smile on his face. He looks so content as though it’s an achievement to make Shane laugh. Does Ilya wish to make him happy too?

“Then I want a boar.”

Ilya’s eyes twitch the way they do when he’s too happy. “I will get you big boar, солнышко.” Before Shane can say anything, he rises with their plates. “What shall we do today?”

“I guess what we’ve been doing.” Shane follows him.

“You are not bored?”

“You said it yourself.” He shrugs. “I’m boring.”

“Boring is good.” Ilya dumps the plates in the sink and takes Shane’s wrist. “We will swim, yes?” He pauses, waiting for Shane’s assent. Shane nods. “You will read to me. Then I will make burgers for lunch.”

Shane totters after him, happy to be dragged along. “The plates. We have to wash them.”

“Not now. They can wait.” Ilya lets go of his hand to shuck his shirt off as they near the deck. He narrowly misses Shane’s shameless ogling of his abs. “Your turn.”

“Oh okay.” Shane’s voice breaks like a puberty-stricken boy. He pulls his shirt over his head, spreading out his arms. Ilya has no reservations about checking Shane out. He stares openly until Shane clears his throat.

“Sorry.” He doesn’t look sorry. “Much too pretty.”

“Shut up.” He doesn’t need a mirror to know he’s blushing.

Ilya turns away, already breaking into a jog. “Last person in the water will wash the dishes.” He calls out with childlike glee.

“Not fair.” Shane chases after him, laughing.

Later, as Ilya arranged, Shane reads him a book. It’s an old architectural book they found collecting dust on the TV stand. Ilya holds his eyes closed as Shane reads as if it is the greatest piece of literature ever written. He makes Shane repeat words he likes and laughs at those he finds hilarious— like cantilever and quoins.

Shane does the dishes from breakfast while Ilya cooks their burgers on the grill outside. They eat at the outdoor dining table and talk about everything but the things that really matter, cocooned in their boring bubble, afraid to poke and burst the illusion of perfection.

**

The 12th day in the cottage starts like every other day. They've settled into a routine that carelessly toes the line of friendship and something more.

Shane may be occasionally gullible but he’s informed enough to understand that friends do not do what they do. He’s been close with Hayden for years and Hayden doesn’t look at him the way Ilya does. He doesn’t touch him as intimately or call him every fucking endearment in the Russian language. His friendship with Ilya was at no point conventional. They were fiancés from conception after all. But now more than ever, it feels weirder.

Touching himself in the shower to the memory of Ilya buried deep inside him usually takes the edge off, but the pressure in his lower body refuses to go away today. It makes him more sensitive to every brush of Ilya’s skin against his own. He jumps at the barest contact and can’t meet Ilya’s gaze. He realizes before the end of breakfast that Ilya has stopped touching him.

Ilya doesn’t suggest swimming after breakfast or enthusiastically announce the rest of their schedule for the day— which he usually makes up on the spot. In fact, he goes out of his way to avoid Shane.

Shane is more annoyed than hurt by the turn of events. He's so irritated that he’s hankering for a fight. By the time night comes around, there’s a stubborn itch under his skin that begs to

be scratched by his infuriating fiancé. Shane moves around the house as loudly as possible, shuffling his feet, cluttering cutlery, and banging doors.

It all comes to a head when he bumps into Ilya in the doorway of their bedroom. Normally, Shane would apologize and step out of the way. Today, he nudges an unsuspecting Ilya out of his way.

“Watch where you are going, Rozanov.”

“What the fuck is your problem with me!?” Ilya explodes.

Yes. The anger in his voice gratifies the hungry pit growing in Shane’s stomach. “I don’t have a problem with anything.”

“You have been weird all day.”

“So what, I don’t entertain you for one day and it’s a problem?!” He saunters into their bedroom knowing Ilya will follow.

“You entertain me?” Ilya follows, sneering. “You think I need boring Hollander to entertain me!?”

“I know you don’t. You have a thousand different lovers to entertain you.” Ilya’s face darkens. He brushes past Shane to the wardrobe. Shane shadows him, panting. “What, you have no rebuttal to that?”

Ilya pulls his shirt off and snatches a pillow up. “I will sleep on the couch.” Shane steps in his way, yanks the pillow from his hand. Ilya is in clear shock. “What has gotten into you!?”

Shane doesn’t know. All he knows is that he’s warm all over. That Ilya’s bodily heat, so close to him, makes him hotter. “I don’t know.”

Ilya searches his face, pausing too long on his lips. “Out of my way, Hollander.” It’s more of a plea than a command.

“Or what?”

Ilya presses him back against the wardrobe. Rough enough to punch a breath out of him but not enough to bruise. An epiphany hits Shane in that instant. This is what he’s been craving. For Ilya to hold him down like this. The pillow hanging from his fingers falls to the floor. If he doesn’t kiss Ilya now, the gods may as well end his life this very second.

Shane moves. Or maybe Ilya did. Perhaps they met in the middle. All Shane registers is getting consumed by the heat of Ilya’s mouth. Shane falls into it with a sigh, parting his lips wider.

“Fuck, Shane.”

He whimpers in protest when Ilya takes his chin to break the kiss. But before he can fall to his knees and beg, Ilya pulls him back in. His lips are hot and silky. And his hands are

everywhere, tearing at Shane's clothes, squeezing his ass, and pressing so deep into him that Shane can almost feel every vein on his dick.

"Freckles," Ilya murmurs, nose pressed to Shane's skin. "So beautiful."

Shane wants to ask him if they are more beautiful than Svetlana. Everything about Ilya is perplexing: his gentle gaze and his rough hands, his honeyed words and his icy distance.

Ilya has always adored them. Shane doesn't know what he sees. "I hate them." His voice comes out as nothing more than a whisper, lost between kisses and the fluttering pleasure building inside.

"What is there to hate?" Ilya hums into Shane's mouth. "Is beautiful. You are beautiful." Shane's fears, his pride—all slip from his grasp as Ilya slides his hands down, spreads his legs, and wraps a firm hand around where he is already hard and needy.

"Ilya," Shane pants. The room is bathed in an amber haze. It shimmers on Ilya's cheeks. "Ilyusha." They are impossibly close. Shane needs him closer. Inside him, and closer still. "I want you." He gasps out.

"You have me," Ilya says. "Have never denied you."

Shane could argue that with years' worth of evidence but now's not the time. "Then please."

"Please what?" The pressure on his dick disappears. Shane shudders, considers begging for more. The wooden wardrobe is cold against his cheeks as Ilya flips him around, pushing his face into it. A drawer opens and closes. Shane's shorts come down in a single motion. Then a slick finger circles his hole. His vision burns hot, matching the aching need inside him.

"Like that." His back arches into Ilya's hand. His legs twitch and open wider to welcome the intrusion. "More please."

Ilya keeps his word. He doesn't deny Shane the pleasure. One finger becomes two. By three, Shane is covered in sweat, his chest sticking to the wardrobe. Ilya latches a mouth onto where his neck meets his shoulder and sucks stinging bites into his skin.

"Fuck Shanya, if you keep making these sounds," Ilya grips his slack jaw, holding his chin and forcing his neck to the side. Shane stares back, tongue peeking out to touch Ilya's thumb. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

"Tell me, котенок."

Heat is an unbearable thing. Shane's body is an inferno. "You," he murmurs. "I want you."

Ilya lifts him like he weighs nothing, and walks him back to the bed. His back hits the mattress so fast that his breath is lost in a gasp. Ilya kneels over him, one hand wrapped around his throbbing cock. "Show me," he grits out. Sweat rolls down his temple, his eyes burning into Shane.

There is nothing but Ilya in Shane's mind. Around its fuzzy edges, and in the center of it, only Ilya remains. His golden skin, his perfect body, the turn of his mouth when Shane crawls to him to press his tongue on the tip of his cock. Ilya lets out a shuddering moan and tangles his fingers in Shane's hair as Shane swallows him down.

"Fuck Shane, so nice and wet," Ilya grunts, holding Shane's head steady. They fall into a rhythm, his jaw aching deliciously from the little thrusts. Ilya's cock touches the back of his throat. It is perfectly intense and just like how Shane has craved every fucking night. Better. Shane moans around him, arches his back as his senses flood with the heady euphoria of being used by Ilya this way.

"You're perfect," Ilya says, broken. "Perfect for me."

Shane makes an encouraging sound. Yes, he wants to say. I was made for you to love. For you to fuck. For your fingers. For your cock. For you only.

Ilya tears him away from his cock and tilts his face up. A small smile flashes on Ilya's face before he brings his lips down and kisses him on his bruised mouth. He falls back against the bed, bringing Ilya down with him.

"Did you like sucking my cock?"

Shane nods and folds his legs around Ilya's waist. "Was that okay?"

"Too good. Perfect." Ilya kisses him. Breathes against his lips. "I want to be inside you." He lines himself carefully between Shane's legs. "You feel that?"

It would be impossible not to. "Yes."

"Did you miss having my cock inside you?" Shane nods again with reckless abandon. "Did you fuck other—,"

Shane kisses him before he can finish the sentence. "If you don't fuck me now Ilya, I will go out there and fuck the men you so desperately want me to fuck."

"No no Shanya." Ilya presses forward. He pushes in slowly, watching Shane squirm. "You are pretty, мой ангел. Prettier when you have my cock in you."

Something explodes behind Shane's eyes as he is stretched impossibly wide. Shane cants his chin for a kiss, seeking more connection. Ilya gives it to him.

"Breathe," Ilya whispers, caressing his sides soothingly. "Are you okay?"

Shane tries to say something assuring. A breathy incomprehensible sound comes out instead. He holds onto Ilya's shoulders as he meets his careful thrusts shakily.

"Hollander, Shanya," Ilya breathes. "Fuck." His mutters quickly turn into growls as he thrusts harder and faster. "You are so tight."

"Ilya," Shane sighs, taking in Ilya's state of complete rapture. He's beautifully pink and shiny with sweat. His golden hair sticks to his forehead as he fucks Shane into the mattress. Shane has never seen anything more stunning. "Please." He doesn't know what he's begging for. Another gasp. "Please."

"I will give you." Ilya angles his hips and thrusts. Shane twists, eyes wide open. "Found you," Ilya gasps into his mouth.

He hits that little spot repeatedly with each stroke. Shane turns limp, his wet eyes fixated on Ilya. His lips fall apart as the image of Ilya burns into his mind. It joins all the other images of Ilya that Shane stored over the years. The one who silently followed him around. The one who planned an escape with him. The one who kissed him. Who hurt him. Who made love to him. All of Ilya and all his personhood.

Pressure builds steadily first. Then it becomes inevitable. Shane gives away around Ilya. His cock sits in a pool of pearly liquid, twitching every time Ilya sinks deeper into him.

"Are you close?"

"Mmm," Shane babbles. Ilya holds him tight as his orgasm hits him in deep, unyielding waves. Ilya follows quickly, eyes rolled back as he loses control. He buries his face in Shane's sweaty neck, his hips driving into Shane's limp body in broken uncontrolled thrusts.

When the tremors end, Shane looks up at Ilya just to find him already watching. "Ilya."

"Mhmm, моя бабочка."

Shane's heart melts at the nickname. "We've made a mess."

"Oh my God, Hollander, don't be boring."

He smiles. "Did I feel boring?"

"Good boring, зайка. You are perfect." He presses a kiss into Shane's shoulder. "Will you talk to me now? Why were you mad at me all day?"

Shane throws an arm over his eyes. "Ugh Ilya, can you forget about that?"

"Now I want to know." Ilya pulls the arm off, meeting his gaze. "You make me curious cat."

"I was just reallyhornyokay."

"What? What is that?"

His face burns hotter. "I said I was justreallyhorny."

"Slower and louder?"

"Fuck off. You heard me." Shane glares as Ilya laughs. "You're such an asshole."

“No baby.” He whines in a way that melts all of Shane’s defenses. “You are so cute. Next time, just say Ilya I want your cock. Is yours, no? Your husband’s cock.” He squeezes Shane’s thigh.

“Fiancé.” Shane’s grumble becomes a laugh as Ilya tackles him with kisses.

**

Shane wakes up around three in the morning to find Ilya’s side of the bed empty. Fear paralyzes him to the spot and the voices in his head rejoice at his misery.

He left. He doesn’t love you. He will never love you, they taunt.

He’s still trembling when Ilya emerges through the door thirty minutes later, holding his phone. He stumbles when he sees Shane. Places his phone on the nightstand and crawls back under the sheets.

“How long have you been awake?” He brushes the hair from Shane’s eyes.

“A couple of minutes. Where were you?”

“Just out. It is early. Sleep, котенок.”

Shane searches his face quietly. Whispers. “I thought you left.”

“No—,”

“If you keep running away after touching me, I’m gonna develop a complex.”

“Hey,” He hugs Shane to his chest. “I’m here, Shanya.”

“Thank you.” Shane is just so damn happy to see him. He curls into Ilya’s chest and doesn’t even try to hide his tears.

As he sobs in Ilya’s arms, he can’t help but think just how fucked up he is.

**

All that’s left of their groceries is Ilya’s Lays chips, too many cans of Coke, four and a half cans of ginger ale, three potatoes, one big cabbage, a wrinkled carrot, and a pack of skinless chicken breast. Shane counts them off his fingers, perched on the island.

“Good.” Ilya does not share his worries. “I will make chicken breast with potatoes.”

“What about tomorrow or the days after?”

“Shanya,” Ilya plants his hands on both sides of Shane, fitting himself between his legs. “You want to stay here forever? With me?”

“Obviously.” He’s emboldened by Ilya’s playfulness. Kisses his pursed lips, a gesture that indicates Ilya wants to be kissed. “You’re my husband.”

“Fiancé.” Ilya teases.

“You fucking asshole!” This is undercut by the laughter in his voice.

“But your asshole, yes?”

“Yes. Now go make breakfast. I’m hungry.”

“Bossy. Gimme kiss for motivation.”

Shane locks his ankles around Ilya and kisses him long and deep. He really doesn’t want to let him go now that they are this close. He smells faintly of Shane’s body wash and one of the many bottles of perfume he has.

“You said you were hungry, Hollander.”

“How about I eat you instead?”

Ilya groans, burying his face in Shane’s belly. “Do not tempt me. You know I am too easy for my husband.”

“Fiancé.” It’s an inside joke now. The first of many, Shane hopes.

Shane sits and looks pretty while Ilya cooks. He pauses now and again with puckered lips that Shane gladly kisses. Breakfast is surprisingly delicious despite their limited resources.

“You could be a chef if inheriting a multimillion-dollar empire doesn’t work out.”

“Cooking is for my husband. Multimillion empire is for buying delicious ingredients.”

Shane laughs, oddly pleased and painfully bewitched. “You’re so sure they will take us back. What if we’ve already been disowned?”

“Yuna and David have only you. Papa has— Alexei? No, I do not think we will be disowned.”

Shane bites his top lip. “How do you think they’re doing?”

“They will be fine.”

“My parents—,”

“They will be fine too. Eat up. I made you good food. We can worry about parents later, hmm?”

“Okay.”

They kick a ball around after breakfast. Shane is terrible but Ilya may be worse. He’s winded after a couple of minutes. Shane teases him about his stamina which prompts a long game of cat and mouse. He lets himself get caught after a while, laughing as Ilya pins him to the grass.

“Got you.”

“You got me. What do you want to do now since you suck at soccer!?”

Ilya shrugs. “I cannot be too perfect. This is my only flaw.”

“You’re so full of yourself.”

“I think you like it.”

“I don’t like anything.” He wiggles away.

They end up in the bedroom again, Shane on his knees with his lips stretched around Ilya’s dick. Ilya returns the favor and they lie boneless in the sheets.

“I think we should nap. I will keep you up all night.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Is a promise.”

They make small talk until Ilya falls asleep. Shane watches him in repose. He looks peaceful like this. Shane draws shadow figures across his face until he passes out too.

Like the night before, Shane wakes up alone. Unencumbered by yesterday’s fears, he stretches in bed and sets out to find his companion. Ilya is not in the living room or in the kitchen, where he usually is at this time, whipping up something for dinner. Shane frowns. He’s about to call out Ilya’s name when he hears him from one of the unfurnished guest rooms. Shane follows his voice.

Ilya’s voice is softer as he speaks in Russian. He mentions something about a real marriage. There’s a pause and then some laughter.

“I have to go, Sveta. He will wake up soon. Okay. Love you too.”

Shane is frozen in place. A migraine starts from the back of his head and explodes behind his eyes. He trembles as the door swings open. Ilya’s smile disintegrates when he sees him.

“Shanya.” He stretches out and Shane steps out of his reach. His eyes go wide. “Is not what it looks like.”

“So you haven’t been lying to me, while sneaking out of our bed to talk to Svetlana!?” Ilya rubs his hand over his lips but doesn’t dispute it. “That’s what I thought.” Shane turns around and marches for the bedroom, his vision blurring at the edges.

Ilya’s steps behind him are loud. “Will you listen to me, Hollander?”

“What is there to listen to?” He pulls out his valise, now empty, and throws it open on the floor. “More of your deceit? Fuck, Ilya, how do I fall for your lies every fucking time?”

“Sorry, sorry! I wanted to be selfish for once.”

Shane scoffs. Throws a shirt into the bag. “For once? You’ve always been selfish. You take and take and take! You just don’t know when to stop, Ilya.” He rubs at his burning eyes. “You could’ve just let me go! If you asked me, fuck Ilya, if you asked me, I would’ve been so damn shattered but I would’ve let you hide here with Svetlana.”

“That is not true!”

“It’s not enough that you’re happy! You need me to be miserable!”

“Stop it, Shane! You will not point fingers at me when you have done worse!”

“What!?”

“You are doing it again. You dangle happiness before me like a— like a little fish! And when I try to take, you snatch it back and laugh in my face!”

Anger sidles close to his hurt. “You fucking demon! You make me out to be the bad guy whenever you’re caught in your lies.”

“I am demon?” Ilya is close to tears. “I told one fucking lie!”

“Oh God,” Shane pushes his hair back from his face, tugging on the strands hard enough to hurt. “Whenever it looks like things might actually work between us, you fuck it up! It’s a pattern, Ilya! You cut me off after our first kiss! Threw me out the first time we made love —,”

“You asked me to open our marriage, Shanya! You woke me up early morning to tell me you wanted an open marriage!”

“I wanted to make you happy!”

“An open marriage would make me happy!?”

“You love Svetlana. It was the only way to make everyone satisfied. I just want to make you happy, Ilya. I’ve always only wanted to make you happy!”

“Well, you are doing a shitty job of it!”

“Fuck.” Shane’s tears spill. Failure has a sour taste. He thought it’d be more bitter. But perhaps Shane has tasted so much bitterness that he has grown resistant to its taste.

When Ilya laughed the first time they met, the light in his eyes could’ve rivaled the illumi display. As the years went by, it dampened from Grigori’s maltreatment. Irina’s untimely demise took some of it to the grave. Shane desperately fanned its dying embers, content when it occasionally flickered back to life, joyful when it sparkled radiantly, and sad when they died again.

After eighteen, Shane hardly saw him anymore. Ilya wouldn't let him close enough to try to make him happy. He stuck with Svetlana and Sasha, with whom he smiled in paparazzi photos. Shane saw the light but it never burned as brilliantly as when they were eight.

In Shane's quest to find Ilya's light, he abandoned his own, depriving it of oxygen until it fizzled and died.

Maybe they were made for the dark. Maybe they were not meant for happiness. Maybe all they'll have is this broken thing. Chasing joys in the few moments they have together, igniting in their coupling, burning with verve only to wane when they fall apart.

"I don't think we should get married." Shane finally says. Ilya is already nodding, face crumpling as he turns away. Shane foolishly wants to reach for him. To comfort him. "We don't mean to hurt each other but we end up doing just that. And— and I don't think I can make you happy."

Ilya is full-on sobbing now, palms in his face. Shane's tears are blinding too. He wishes he knew how to stop this. This wasn't meant to happen. According to Ilya's schedule for today, they should be having dinner, which would be followed by more lovemaking.

He turns away from Ilya. Gently folds his remaining clothes into the open bag, pausing periodically to wipe his tears. His heart is heavier when he finishes. "Can you call me an Uber?"

Ilya shakes his head. "I uh—," he sniffs. "I fixed your car."

"Oh. When was that?"

He shrugs. "I do not remember when. We swam in the lake afterward. It was nice."

Shane nods awkwardly. "I guess this is it."

"This is it."

The valise feels stacked with boulders as Shane drags it to the entrance. Just as he's about to cross the threshold, Ilya calls his name. He faces Ilya again. The flush in his face and the drying tear tracks on his cheeks remind Shane of the afternoon they buried Irina. He looks smaller and saddled with sadness.

"I did not want to ask before but I want to know for— how to say it— closure. Why did you change your mind?" Ilya sniffs, angling his body away. He looks ready to bolt at any moment. "You said you would steal me away. You promised to run away together. But I came and you did not show up. I waited—," he swallows. "For so long. But you did not come."

Shane remembers everything from year eighteen. The memory of sitting on the floor in Irina's library and telling one lie to make his friend happy is vivid. He remembers the fear that gripped him when he woke up to so many missed calls and texts from Ilya, thinking something bad had happened to him. They've talked very little in the past seven years that Shane wouldn't have to scroll far to find the messages from that night.

It strikes him, with a stab, why Ilya had called so many times. What his message ‘here’ meant. Ilya withdrew from him right after this. The revelation almost sends Shane to his knees. His friendship with Ilya died by his own hands.

“Ilya— I didn’t know,” Shane confesses.

“Didn’t know what?”

“I didn’t know you took my words seriously. We were so young and powerless.”

Ilya nods once, lips twisting. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t. I lied to make you feel better.” He edges closer to Ilya. “But if I knew you were waiting, I would’ve left everything behind for you. I would go wherever you go. I would come to you crossing all five oceans.” Ilya lets out a shuddering breath as Shane palms his face. “Didn’t you notice that I was in love with you?”

Ilya’s lips tremble as they fail to form words. “I waited all night.” He chokes out after a few tries. “All night, Shanya.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“You did not know I was waiting?”

“I didn’t.”

“Shit. I thought you did it to make a fool of me.” He steps away from Shane, combing his hands through his hair. “What have I done to us?”

Ilya refuses to take comfort from Shane. He says sorry repeatedly as he weeps.

When it gets quiet, they stand a few feet apart, surrounded by ruins of the storm they unleashed. Shane wonders if this changes anything or if it’s just closure as Ilya called it. When it becomes clear that Ilya has nothing more to say to him, Shane falls back.

He takes the handle of his valise and leaves the cottage more broken than when he arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter four ahhhh don’t hate me

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Note that every conversation outside of Shane and Ilya's is purely in Russian.

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

Ilya Rozanov must have fallen in love at the age of eight.

His thoughts are inhabited by the freckled brown-eyed boy with the big laugh just after their first meeting. People around him hardly laugh. Papa is perpetually stoic. Mama is seldom happy. And Alexei would rather die than show any form of emotion.

Shane is different. He smiles when he looks at Ilya. Laughs at Ilya's absurdities, and retaliates with his own muted version. The day Mama sits him down and tells him Shane would one day be his husband is one of Ilya's happiest memories. There is so much he wants to do with Shane that even forever seems too short a time to accomplish them all.

One time, Mama lets slip that Alexei was originally Shane's betrothed. Ilya was chosen belatedly because they were closer in age. That was Ilya's first experience with jealousy. He couldn't stand his brother for weeks. Not that Alexei pulled his head out of his ass long enough to notice.

Shane quickly becomes everything to Ilya. He is the sun, and Ilya, a planet that orbits around him. His love for Shane grows with the passing seasons. By the spring of year eleven, Ilya is ready to move into the Hollander's home, just to be nearer to him.

That's not to say their relationship is always smooth sailing. They fight mostly over inconsequential things and sparingly over consequential things, like his reaction to Shane walking out on him in the Hollanders' music room. He takes that as a personal affront. Avoids Shane while simultaneously missing him. He should have better control over his feelings. He does not want to end up always angry and miserable like Alexei and Papa.

Life without Shane is lonely. Every second feels like an hour. His nights are longer and his days, unending. Ilya drives his model cars along the windowsill of his bedroom, watching them bump into one another, with very little interest. He gets the feeling the butterflies don't want to see him so he doesn't visit the garden either.

It gets lonelier after Mama passes. Ilya hates being alone. He finds himself seeking out his annoying brother who works even harder to avoid him. His guilt exacerbates when nobody else is around. Mama's death could've been avoided. He should've found her sooner. He should've saved her. Her body, cold and pale, terrorizes his dreams and waking moments. Mama's eyes were the bluest things Ilya had ever seen. When he found her body, her lips were shades bluer than her lifeless eyes.

Svetlana is a good friend. Ilya barely sees her but when he does, he is happy to learn new English words to impress Shane. He brags to her about Shane and his peculiarities. He also tells her about Shane's strawberry smoothie-making talents though he has never tasted it. He doesn't need to. Shane hardly lies, and he is perfect.

She indulges his rambling with a few playful eye rolls. Ilya is certain that Shane would love her. She is just as smart and uses funny English words like him.

When Mama passes, Svetlana is a pillar, albeit a rocky one. She stands by Ilya and offers comfort, but Ilya can only breathe again after Shane stumbles into the library, as awkward as ever, babbling apologies. It isn't the first time Ilya wants to kiss his best friend but it is the first time he almost acts on it.

Life, for him, was always bleak. Others would argue that someone as affluent as himself should have no hardships. Papa, unfortunately, is of the same view. He strikes Ilya on days when leaving his bed takes too much effort. Hits him when Ilya presents himself in a manner he believes is damaging to the family's reputation.

Ilya knows Papa sees it too. That he inherited more than just Mama's blue eyes and blonde hair. Her sickness lives in him. It is something that money cannot fix. It is a weakness and the Rozanov men are not weak.

**

Loud parties overwhelm the voices in Ilya's head. Alcohol mutes his pain. Nicotine takes away his stress. Papa did not like the parties at first but he prefers them to Ilya moping about the house. Whenever he ends up in the tabloids, Alexei looks at him with a certain form of pride. Ilya would do anything to get them off his back.

Shane is not like them. He rebukes Ilya every chance he gets.

"Smoking is disgusting, Ilyusha." He would say. "I don't want to talk to you!" But he talks. And he laughs when Ilya gets closer. Sighs when Ilya touches him. He is Shane and he is Ilya's and Ilya is besotted with his fiancé. His honey brown eyes. His mouth. The smattering of freckles across his nose. Shane was cute at 8. At sixteen, he is stunning. Ilya is overwrought with nerves in Shane's presence. It's almost concerning how much he wants Shane. To trample on impulses that might scare Shane away, Ilya smokes one cigarette before their meetings.

**

After chaotic nights out, Ilya slumps in his sweats in Svetlana's room and passes the time with RomComs. What started as English practice becomes something he takes pleasure in. He loves happy endings and he especially loves the ones where the protagonists chase their love interest through the airport or even better, to another city. He loves the idea of wanting someone so intensely that the thought of being apart from them is inconceivable.

**

In year eighteen, they are attached at the hip despite the distance. They text all day and send selfies back and forth. Ilya ends his nights with lengthy calls with Shane. They do nothing without consulting each other first. He Facetimes Shane at the car dealership when he drives home his first Lamborghini. Shane sees every piece of clothing before he purchases them. It usually goes like: "Ilya that's just ridiculous. Don't buy that." He buys it anyway. "Ilya, that's an obscene color. Don't go out in that." He goes out in it anyway.

"Why do you ask my opinion just to do the opposite?"

"Because you are cute when you are angry."

"You're so annoying."

Ilya, however, listens when Shane tells him not to shave his curls off because Shane threatened to have his freckles permanently removed.

They make plans for when they grow older and distance is no longer a problem. They imagine what life would've looked like in different circumstances.

"Like, what if we had been born into different families?" Shane asks.

"I do not want to imagine. We would not have met, Shanya."

"I think we would've," Shane says, sounding so sure. He props his phone against a pillow and lies on his side. Ilya imitates him so it simulates lying side by side. "I would've met you somewhere, probably on the bus or something. And I would've known instantly that we were soulmates."

"Soulmates, hmm?" He can see every freckle across Shane's nose. He wants to kiss every single one of them.

"Mhmm. Maybe we would've been co-workers."

"You would wear glasses, yes?"

"I guess? I'd need to if I have to read a lot."

"You would tuck your shirt into your civilian pants like a good nerd boy."

Shane giggles. "Can you shut up?"

"We would probably be high school classmates. I did not bring a pen to school and you have so many because you are big nerd. You will fall for my charm after that."

"I think you will fall for my charm," Shane debates.

"Yes." There is nothing to dispute. "I would have seen your cute glasses and told teacher. Look, that nerd is my soulmate."

"Why am I a nerd in every scenario?"

“You are a nerd here, no? I do not want to change anything about you.”

The future Ilya builds over daily phone calls with Shane is his sole purpose of living. It's unfair to put that kind of burden on one person, he is aware. But he can't help it. He thinks that for as long as Shane is in his life, he can be happy. So when Shane promises to save him from his personal perdition, Ilya thinks that the god he does not believe in has finally answered his prayers. Every form of self-control he mustered over the years fails him when Shane kisses him. His beautiful Shane. His lover, his butterfly, and now his saviour. Ilya kisses him back.

Shane Hollander tastes like gentle chaos. An amalgamation of everything beautiful and dangerous. Ilya never shied away from danger. He craves it. He craves Shane. He wants everything. He will finally have everything.

Ilya leaves home at 10:30 pm. Arrives at the hotel at eleven. He sits in the lobby as he waits, knees bouncing, fighting the urge to bombard Shane with calls and texts. Come 12 am, Ilya sends him a message, '*here*'. He expects an immediate response. In the absence of that, he calls Shane. No answer. At this point, he starts to feel uneasy. Good things rarely follow when that happens. It is confirmed four hours later when Ilya leaves the lobby without Shane.

He heads straight for his room, numb to everything around him. He cannot sleep. Just stares at the tiny light bulb fixed into the concrete of his ceiling. He stays awake long enough to hear his phone ringing. He lets it ring until it starts grating on his nerves. He turns it off and falls asleep.

Ilya's first heartbreak was the death of his mother. His second is the death of his relationship with Shane.

He is furious that Shane made a fool of him. Shane with his innocent face, and his shy smile. How could anyone have guessed his mendacity? How could Ilya have seen past the tinted lenses of his love?

“Just talk to him,” Svetlana advises.

“Nothing to say.”

“You love him. I don't get it.”

“Love like every emotion dies.”

“You're awfully stubborn for a hopeless romantic.”

Ilya carries this stubbornness along to meetings with the Hollanders. He puts a tight lid on his emotions whenever he catches sight of Shane. His body has yet to receive the message that Shane is now their enemy. It craves him especially when they are in proximity. His heart lurches at the briefest eye contact. His fingers itch to reach for him. To kiss his supple lips. To smooth the lines between his brows. And stop him from biting his nails.

He seeks the joys Shane brought him in other lesser things. Bodies upon bodies. Partying till daybreak. Sex with Svetlana, a one-time affair. They are better off as friends only. Liquor strong enough to burn his throat. Nothing can measure up. Nothing is Shane Hollander.

Grigori frowns upon his lifestyle but he doesn't discipline Ilya physically anymore. Ilya towers several inches above him and his muscles are bigger from his time in the gym. Ilya reckons Papa must be a little afraid to hit him. However, his verbal abuse carries the same weight.

In year twenty, Ilya bids Mama a tearful farewell at her grave. He sits with his back against her headstone, a wreath at his feet.

"I wanted to be closer to him. But it's different now. We aren't close. When I leave here, I won't see you anymore either. I'm losing everything, Mama." He presses the heel of his palm into his eyes. "I miss him so much. I just wish things were different."

Mama stays silent. Sadly, the dead do not speak.

The family moves to Canada and Ilya purchases a big house in Westmount. White clinical walls. Lifeless art. Tan furniture. Empty and soulless, just like himself. He breaks it in with a big party. Sasha flies in from France to attend. Svetlana provides a guest list of Canada's elite. The house is teeming before noon. He clinks glasses with strangers. Takes shots off the belly buttons of models. Makes out with guys he might never see again.

So many people around him. And yet, Ilya can only think of the one person who isn't.

He cries in Svetlana's lap when the crowd disperses. Her comfort comes without sympathy.

"He did not show up," Ilya says.

"Did you invite him? Does he even know you're in Canada?"

"He does. Sergei sent an email."

"Sergei, your lawyer. Do you even hear yourself? End your misery. Just call him."

"I blocked him."

Svetlana pushes his head off her lap. "You blocked your husband?"

"He was upset. He said he would not text or call me again."

"So you blocked him."

"Yes, now I wouldn't know if he really stopped calling. It's kind of like a Schrodinger's cat situation. Did he text, did he not? We'll never know."

Svetlana stares at him, dumbfounded. "Oh my God, you're an idiot."

“I’m heartbroken, Sveta. Be nice.” She kicks him away when he attempts to rest in her lap again, muttering insults as she leaves him alone.

**

Rose Landry earns a target on her back from the moment Ilya sees her in the news with her lips attached to his husband’s. His heart goes through what he imagines a vehicle feels, caught between the teeth of a car crusher. Ilya feels so lightheaded, he braces his palms against the kitchen sink, where he saw the news, and bows his head until the nausea passes.

Jealousy is a terrible emotion. Ilya feels it crawl from his toes, poisoning every vessel in its wake. More than once, he has to stop himself from storming the internet with news of his engagement to Shane. He squanders a pack of cigarettes at a sitting. Does Rose know Shane is engaged? Has Shane forgotten he is engaged?

Hypocrite! You deserve it. He’ll break off your contract. He’ll marry the perfect and famous Rose Landry. You’ll have no one.

Ilya chugs vodka straight from the bottle. Highly intoxicated, he talks himself into sending Shane a message. It probably wouldn’t go through. Shane must have blocked him back already.

бабочка 

01:00

~~happy birthday, shanya~~

He backspaces and starts over.

бабочка 

01:00

you arw datinf rose lanfry now

better thsn me yes?

pwrfwct hollander with perfwct girlfriemd

Ilya is taken aback when his messages double-tick. He stares at the screen for a while, getting another shock when the typing dots pop up. In a panic, he blocks Shane again before throwing up in the sink.

Shane is absent from their next family meeting. That, of course, prompts another spiraling session. What was so important for Shane to have broken routine? Shane showed up even when he was sneezing from a cold, muttering apologies and throwing furtive glances at Ilya.

He’s with his perfect girlfriend. He’ll leave you in no time. No mother, no Shanya. The boy without love.

Ilya's liver suffers the brunt of his self-deprecatory thoughts. Ilya unblocks Shane, meaning to beg him to break up with Rose Landry. But once he gets his phone, his ego falls back into place.

бабочка 

20:00

you are too good for meetings now, hollander?

It shows read right away. Ilya waits for a reply, heart hammering in his chest. Five minutes later, he takes Shane's silence as an emphatic yes. Yes, I'm too good for meetings (you) now. He blocks Shane again just to stop checking his phone so much.

Shane Hollander twists the knife in Ilya's chest just a few hours later when a well-lit photo of him kissing Rose Landry hits the internet.

"He wants me dead, Sveta. He's doing this to end me." Ilya cries to his best friend. "They called them the couple to look out for. That's somebody's husband."

"I know what you should do. Talk to him."

"I must tell the whole world he's my husband." He reaches for his phone which is promptly snatched from him. "Nooo Sveta, let me claim him."

"How about you talk to him? Tell him you don't like it when he dates other people. Which by the way I think is hypocritical."

"I don't date other people. My heart is for Shane."

"Does he know that!? Maybe Rose is just sex for him too."

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all. She's taking my Shane to Hollywood sex parties!"

"They were in Vancouver and that looked nothing like a sex party."

Ilya eyes her. "Whose side are you on?"

"The side of love."

"There's no more love now that he's dating the famous and perfect Rose Landry." A sudden wave of sadness clogs his throat. "She's everything I'm not."

"I think you are amazing."

"Yes?"

"Obviously."

Ilya nods. He clears his throat. "You're not wrong. I am perfect." Svetlana rolls her eyes but she's smiling. "I know what to do. I am Hollander's husband. I will forbid him from seeing

her or anyone.”

“Forbid!? That’s literally the opposite of what I asked you to do.”

He grins. “I know.”

**

Ilya dresses up in a newly tailored suit for the meeting with his promiscuous husband. He spends about an hour on his hair, taming the unruly curls. He spritzes on the perfume Shane complimented him a lot on. He doesn’t smoke, determined to prove to Hollander that he can be as perfect as his movie star girlfriend.

Shane shows up looking as boring as ever. Same clothes, same shoes, same hair. And still, Ilya is as taken as he was the first time he saw him. He avoids Shane’s eyes to tame his raging heart and maintain some semblance of nonchalance.

Shane is as difficult as Ilya expected. He gets under Ilya’s skin like no other person, with the littlest effort. In fact, Ilya thinks he’s not even trying to. To retaliate, Ilya buries himself deep under Shane’s skin. Deliberate with his digs until Shane is pink in the face. Ilya loves Shane’s anger. He is what Ilya would describe as a harmless storm. A toothless lion.

They argue as politely as they can in the midst of company.

“And you?” Shane asks. “Are you in love with Svetlana?”

Ilya could take him out of his misery. Maybe repeat that Svetlana is just a friend. But he is not in the mood for kindness. Not when Shane is dating Rose Landry.

“What does it matter?” He should end it here. “You will warm my bed one day.”

It’s worth it to see Shane squirm in his seat. The flush of pink over his irritation. Ilya burns to pull him across the table and kiss his lips swollen. By the end of the meeting, Ilya’s Shane problem worsens exponentially.

Two years of trying to get over him undone in a sitting.

At night, he opens the album he created for Shane’s photos, kept under two-factor verification on his phone like some confidential government documents. He thumbs through them one after the other until his chest hurts. Until he craves a cigarette or three or seven. Until he fists his cock, pumping furiously with the imagery of Shane spread across his bed, so beautiful, slicked with sweat, and too fucked out to remember Rose Landry’s name.

“I must fuck him.”

Svetlana groans at the opposite end of the call. “It’s 4 am, Ilya.”

“I can’t sleep.” Ilya flinches when a sudden beep indicates the end of the call.

**

Shane is spotted with more famous people after that. Pretty men and pretty women, mostly people in Rose Landry's circle. Ilya feels sick with each sighting. Svetlana confiscates his phone to prevent more drunk texting.

Ilya's coping mechanisms have lost their appeal. The nightlife feels boring and repetitive. Not the good kind of boring. The kind that covers his mouth when he eats. The kind whose smile draws whiskers across his cheeks. Who asks too many questions. Who wears the same cut of pants and the same brand of shoes because they are comfortable. Who reads autobiographies before bed because;

"Ilyusha, these are people who want the world to know their stories."

Ilya misses his perfectly boring fiancé. The Shane-shaped hole in his heart stretches wider.

Out of all of Rose's friends, Miles gets to Ilya the most. Perhaps because it's the first time that he gets a front row seat to one of these. They are just dancing. It's no big deal. Ilya himself had pulled Svetlana into his lap a few moments ago in a fit of jealousy. Except that he wants to blow his fucking brains out so that he'd never have to remember what Shane looks like in another man's arms.

"I think I will die." Ilya cries, inebriated.

Svetlana does not make fun of him like she usually does. Instead, she tells him everything will be okay, which is somehow worse. He knows nothing will ever be okay if he doesn't have Shane.

While she excuses herself to bring him some water, Ilya calls Shane's phone. Shane is already in bed. Alone. The perfect son. Ilya should have corrupted him when he had the chance.

"You must not let him touch you." He is not above begging. Is not above threatening an innocent man's life. "Is bad for partnership."

He has nearly convinced Shane when Svetlana returns and wrestles his phone from his grip.

"Drink some water and sleep."

"I don't want water. I want Shane."

**

Ilya puts special care into his appearance as he always does when meeting Shane. How fateful that they arrive at the same time. They pose for photos together, their first public appearance since the press conference that announced their marriage.

This night demands more from them. They are expected to act in love and welcome guests. Ilya does not have to feign his feelings. Staying with Shane on the other hand is a problem. He looks stupidly gorgeous with his cute bangs and his cute black suit. Ilya finds it increasingly difficult to keep his hands to himself. He needs a smoke. One cigarette per meeting is not cutting it anymore. He flees to his friends.

“Go talk to your husband, Ilya.” Svetlana scolds, all but pointing to Shane. It’s getting harder to tell if she’s his friend or Shane’s.

“He doesn’t want to talk to me. Maybe he’s waiting for his friends.”

“I don’t see any friends. He’s standing all by himself.” Sasha adds in that annoyingly forced sultry voice. “Go talk to him.”

“Fine.”

Shane doesn’t seem pleased with his company, lunging at Ilya’s throat the moment he stops before him. Ilya lets himself get baited into a passive aggressive argument. Notwithstanding, Shane follows instructions just the way Ilya remembers and hardly protests when he’s lured into a dance.

It’s great to have Shane in his arms again. His scent is intoxicating. His voice, a whisper against Ilya’s ear. Ilya seeks answers and he gets them.

“I haven’t fucked anyone yet. I will soon. I just— I’m waiting for the right moment.”

No he will not have that. He draws back enough to search Shane’s eyes, looking for any signs of deception. All he finds is an earnest nervous gaze. Ilya would want Shane in any form he came in but knowing that nobody had touched him yet makes him more desperate to be the first. To reclaim what he previously lost. Who better to have Shane if not him, his betrothed?

“Come to me tonight.” It is a long shot in the dark.

“What?”

“I booked the penthouse for the night. Come drink with me and my friends.”

Shane agrees and Ilya excuses himself to find his friends. “Book the penthouse for the night.”

“What for?” Sasha asks.

“Shanya is coming over for drinks.”

Ilya is a nervous wreck for all thirty minutes he waits for Shane. He must have changed his mind, Ilya convinces himself. He overthinks what to do if Shane actually does show up. He tries several sitting positions. Takes off his shirt. Puts it back on. He finally decides to leave it on with the buttons open, right in time for Shane to walk through the door, his jacket over one arm, and nerves written all over his face. It is comforting to see Ilya isn’t the only one out of his depth here.

“You are scared I will touch you?”

“I’m scared you won’t.”

Ilya is floored by Shane’s honesty and the genuine fear of rejection in his eyes. How could he ever deny Shane anything?

“You want me to touch you?” He asks just for reassurance.

“Yes.”

Ilya would take him right there if not for the presence of his friends. He reaches for Shane and backs down before he can touch. He does not trust himself to stop once he starts.

First things first he goes to Svetlana behind the bar. “I need you guys to leave.”

“Seriously?”

“Sveta please. Sasha, this is important. My husband is waiting...,” The spot in which Shane stood is empty. Ilya frowns. “Where is he?”

“He ran off to the bedroom.”

Ilya starts to back away. “Make yourselves scarce.” He dashes towards the bedroom. It’s empty. However, the door to the ensuite is slightly ajar, revealing an obviously unraveling Shane.

“You don’t want me.” He says with needy watery eyes. It is the most ridiculous thing Ilya has ever heard. Wanting Shane is all he’s known even before he learned what his dick could be used for.

Ilya kisses him to prove him wrong. His pretty, innocent Shane. He turns liquid in Ilya’s arms. So eager. Ilya feels heady with the knowledge of being the first to touch Shane like this. And the only one if he can help it. He has fucked many people. Witnessed countless orgasms. However, when Shane comes apart under him, around him, it feels like something new.

Я тебя люблю. Ilya’s cowardice seals his lips shut. Soon, he thinks. He will let him know once they are married.

**

Shane weeps and Ilya weeps. Their anger echoes through the bedroom. Ilya says things he does not mean.

After Shane’s departure, he resolves, while sitting on the floor with his nose buried in Shane’s jacket, to let him go. Shane deserves someone sweet. Someone who doesn’t make him cry. It is the hardest decision he has ever had to make.

Svetlana tries to talk him out of it when he calls her. Ilya’s mind is made up. She did not see Shane’s tears or the misery in his eyes. He did. By the next day, they already devised a plan. On the eve of his wedding, Ilya will hide away in the cottage that Shane’s parents gifted them. He packs as many clothes as he can and stocks up on food that takes little effort to make.

“There’s still time to stop this,” Svetlana reasons. “You love him in your own sick twisted way. Just get married and work it out later.”

“The sick and twisted part is what’s the problem.” Ilya looks at his friend soberly. “I think—I’m still angry about his lie. I want to forget and move on but.” He shakes his head, tearing up. “I just—I waited for so long and he did not show up.”

It is evening when they arrive at the cottage. It stands like a sanctuary in the middle of a dark forest. As he goes through the front door, Ilya imagines what it would've been like to come with Shane. He would've loved it here. He's been obsessed with buildings since they were little. Ilya recalls giving Shane a tour of his home in Russia when they were fourteen. He was so serious, asking about the type of wood used. Guessed the make of their window just by knocking on the glass. He was always so happy to talk Ilya's ears off about lamps. And Ilya was so happy to listen to him.

Ilya shakes his head, suddenly craving a cigarette. “I need a smoke.”

“I thought you quit.”

He was trying. The only person who triggers a relapse is Shane. He assumed he would be fine, several miles away from him, in the cottage. “I didn't bring any.”

“Good.” Svetlana is frowning at her phone. “Damn, there's no signal here.” She thrusts her phone into the air, already on a mission to find a bar as Ilya offloads his luggage for his long stay.

After a minute or so Svetlana yelps. Ilya rushes toward her, relaxing when he finds her alive and well.

“This room has three bars,” Svetlana announces, laughing. It's a guest room, completely furnished except for the absence of a mattress in the bed frame. “It would've been perfect here if there had been a bed. You could move the mattress from the master bedroom to this room.”

“King size versus queen size. Doesn't matter. I'll make the trip when I want to talk to you.”

It is quiet after Svetlana leaves. Ilya lies in the bed meant for him and Shane and dreams about a honeymoon that will never happen.

**

In the summer of nineteen, Ilya eschewed swimming in the pool and butterfly watching for romcoms. In fact, he was rather resentful of butterflies now. Svetlana suggested *Love Actually*. ‘It's more than just a Christmas movie,’ she said.

Ilya almost made it through the movie without shedding a tear until little Sam chased Joanna through airport security to confess his love. Ilya most certainly did not picture himself and Shane in their place.

Shane Hollander shows up at the cottage like an apparition, his figure at the entrance beautifully backlit by the sun. Calling back to every romantic movie he's seen, Ilya comes to an indubitable conclusion; Shane is here to find him. He can almost picture it. How Shane

must have driven through traffic, honking at other drivers, and breaking past speed limits, just to get to him.

His delusions shatter shortly after. It is the opposite of what he thought; Shane is here to get away from him.

Ilya is upset at first. Anyone would be. They get into it again, yelling like they did just a month ago. There are no tears today though Ilya badly wants to cry. It's not until he's standing toe to toe with Shane, breathing in the angry air he puffs out, that he realizes he doesn't want him to leave. Fuck! What was he thinking running from his wedding? He wants Shane here with him. The fact that they are mostly bad for each other and would only fight if they stayed together is moot in the face of Ilya's growing desire to be selfish. He was foolish to play the martyr. He's not as noble as he thought he was. Trying to let Shane go has only ever yielded pain, pain, and more pain. So who is Ilya to question fate for driving his husband right back into his arms?

The lie itself is simple. 'No signal here' is not even entirely a lie. He only omits that there is signal elsewhere in the cottage. It is morally questionable and grossly manipulative. It is also pitiful to cling to the thing that continuously shreds his heart apart. But fortunately for Ilya and his greed, what breaks him also mends him.

After Shane's angry exit, Ilya hides in the guest bedroom and reads the news. Things are chaotic as expected but strangely positive. The headlines imply an elopement to Aspen, a strangely specific country to decide on.

Ilya calls Svetlana. She takes her sweet time answering. "Aspen, really?" He asks as soon as she does.

"That's an odd way to say thank you! The press was sniffing around for blood. Rose and I had to come up with something when we realized you both ran away."

"You're teaming up with the enemy now."

Ilya can almost hear her eyeroll. "Grow up, it's been five years."

"She kissed my husband!"

"The husband you wouldn't speak to?"

He doesn't need the reminder. "Okay fine. Did you tell her where I am?"

"No, we're not besties...yet."

"Yet?"

"She's cool. We'll hang out later to whine about our idiotic best friends."

"Ughhh. Can you not tell her where I am?"

"Why?"

Ilya hesitates. "I found a little bunny wandering around in the woods."

A gasp. Svetlana has always been so perceptive. "First of all, that's a disturbing way to put it and second of all, Shane is with you? Did you plan this together?"

"No. Turns out we had the same escape plan." Ilya drops his forehead against the wall with a thunk. "Ughh Sveta, you should've seen him. He was so mad and pink and beautiful."

"Where is he now?"

"He left but he'll be back. His car broke down and he knows nothing about cars."

"Jesus Christ, Ilya. This is crazy even for you two. So you're just going to stay there together?"

"It's our honeymoon, no?"

"Okay, I'm done. Try not to kill each other and actually talk to him. Don't be mean to him."

"I'm a nice guy."

"You're mean when you're frustrated."

"I'll be nice to my Shanya. Please don't tell Rose he's with me. She and the other one will try to take my husband from me. Then I'd have no choice but to kill them."

"You complicate your own life." Svetlana sighs. "Fine, you convinced me. It's our secret."

"Thank you. Love you. Bye."

"Love you too."

**

It doesn't go as Ilya hoped. Shane avoids Ilya during the day and cries himself to sleep at night. After the second night, regret and self-doubt start filtering in. His desire to keep Shane close should not be at the expense of Shane's happiness. He decides to be selfless again. He sleeps on the couch at night. Come morning, he'll tell Shane the truth, call him an Uber, and free him from this torment.

Shane doesn't want to be free— another fucked up thing they have in common. He wants Ilya in *their* bed. Shane's guileless eyes free a side of Ilya he has denied for years. Releases memories he tried so damn hard to repress.

His effort pays off when Shane smiles. The kind that scrunches his nose and gathers his freckles into a little cluster. It feels great to hold Shane again. To watch him without feeling angry for his failure to hate him.

"Let's try again," Shane's voice is a timid whisper. How could Ilya refuse him? He says yes.

They fall back into old dangerous patterns. Day-to-day with Shane is simultaneously the most boring and the most exhilarating experience. Shane is predictable in an unpredictable way. A walking oxymoron. His Shanya, who blushes when Ilya calls him *husband*. Who also throws a tantrum over his thirst for Ilya.

It feels like baptism when he sinks into Shane again. A man born again. Shane is divinity and he, a pietist.

"I want to marry him," Ilya tells Svetlana over the phone as Shane snores peacefully in their bed. "I love him so much. My heart does this crazy thing when I look at him."

"Beat?"

"Yes smartass, beat but like more."

"God Ilya, it's three in the morning. You did not just wake me up to gush over your husband."

"There was no time to talk during the day. I was very occupied with Shane."

"Gross."

"I want to ask him to marry me. We did not have the option before, you know? This time, we will be together because we chose to not only because our dead grandparents wanted us to. I'm terrified but I think he'll say yes."

"Why is that kind of sweet? Only you would have to propose to your fiancé." She yawns. "Do you need my help with anything?"

"No. I just wanted to let you know for now. I could not keep it to myself. Too excited."

She laughs fondly. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you. You can sleep now."

"Wow, thanks for the permission."

"I'm far too nice."

"Thanks, your highness." She sounds too sarcastic to be taken seriously. "Goodnight. Love you."

"Love you too."

**

The calm before the storm is misleading. Ilya has the world at his fingertips and loses it in a twinkling.

It is just another phone call with Svetlana. Ilya is happy, as he has been lately, to update her on the latest developments in his relationship with Shane. She sounds more excited now that she isn't half asleep. She has big ideas for the proposal.

"There should be a big ceremony with a bird carrying the ring between its beak."

"He is not a big ceremony person. I was thinking, a helicopter ride with a beautiful sunset," Ilya says. "Shane likes watching the sunset."

"I don't trust you not to jump if he says no."

"You think he'll say no?"

"That's possible." Ilya can tell she's pulling his legs. "You blocked his phone and didn't talk to him for years."

"That's it. Our real wedding will be beautiful and private. Haters are not allowed."

"I did not endure your drunken tears to be excluded from your wedding."

Ilya laughs. "Okay okay. My favorite girl will be right there by my side. I have to go, Sveta. He will wake up soon."

"Lover boy, run off to your husband. Love you."

"Okay, love you too."

Ilya is smiling from cheek to cheek until he sees Shane behind the door. There is pain written across his face but the worst part is that he looks equally resigned too, as though he expected their joy to be short-lived.

Shane yells. Flings clothes into his bag. Calls Ilya selfish. Ilya knows he is and maybe that's why it hurts. Anger and resentment from the past rear their ugly heads. A thousand not-so-harmless storms brew across Shane's face. Ilya takes them on with ones that have been simmering inside his own chest, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"I don't think we should get married," Shane announces. He seems terrified to say it out loud. Ilya is terrified to hear it. Throughout their battles, both internal and external, they always had their marriage. No matter how bad it got, their forever was set in stone. Now, their end feels conclusive.

Ilya's chest caves first. Then his face contorts as he succumbs to tears. He turns away to hide it but maybe that is the problem. Hiding. He's hidden how much hurt he's carried. Camouflaged his pain with parties and names he couldn't remember at gunpoint. Lied to himself that he could go through life without Shane. Not anymore. He faces Shane properly and weeps into his palms.

Ilya has no words to stop or reverse the damage. *Don't go* and *please* turn syrupy in his throat as Shane walks away from him. But before the door closes, he finds his voice and seeks answers to the question that has tormented him for years.

“Why did you change your mind?”

He did not. He did not humiliate Ilya or betray his trust, at least not intentionally. Devastation, disbelief, and defeat are unflattering across Shane’s beautiful cheeks.

His eyes bleed contrition. “I would come to you crossing all five oceans.”

Now, Ilya weeps after Shane’s exit, face buried in his side of the bed. In his scent, as faint as ever.

You’ll die alone.

Ilya has good reason to believe the voice that sounds eerily similar to Papa’s. If he failed to keep Shane, who was basically handed to him on a silver platter, who else would be willing to stay with him? A yawning realization strikes through the inception of his self-pity. Has he ever given Shane a reason to stay? Does Shane know Ilya loves him too? Ilya has thought about it many times. Announced it to his friends through drunken tears. But has never said them to the one who needed to hear them.

I would come to you, crossing all five oceans

It’s the purest form of love declaration Ilya has ever heard, eclipsing every confession from the countless movies he holds so dearly. Shane would choose him. Shane has chosen him time and again.

When Alexei wouldn’t play with him, Shane was happy to, regardless of the language barrier. When Grigori’s discipline marred his face, Shane caressed his bruises and kissed his broken lips. When Mama left him, Shane stayed by his side and built castles in the air with him. The very castles he later resented Shane for. He replied whenever Ilya messaged him. Always picked up the phone when Ilya called. He listened on days when Ilya had nothing to say. Even when Ilya shut him out in the cold, he left his doors wide open.

I would come to you crossing all five oceans.

In Ilya’s fantasies, he’s getting chased through an airport. Always waiting to be loved first because of his fear of being let down. Perhaps it’s time to do the chasing. If anyone deserves to be chased through an airport, it is Shane.

Ilya bursts out of their bedroom, hurrying toward the guest room to call Shane first and then an Uber. The sound of tires rolling on asphalt brings him to a halt. He runs toward the noise, heart pounding wildly. He flings the front door open, stumbling at the sight of Shane stepping out of the car with a small plastic bag dangling from his hand.

Shane glances up. His unoccupied thumb hooks into the pocket of his borrowed shorts. He walks to the foot of the steps and stops. Ilya can see how wrecked he looks. Puffy eyes. Pink-nosed. Lips bitten red.

“I was leaving,” he rushes out before Ilya can say anything. “But I had to stop because I had a panic attack and couldn’t stop crying. Then so many messages from my parents, Hayden, and

Rose started coming in. Rose said everyone thinks we eloped. But I-I guess you knew that already. While I was in the car I thought, Ilya must have wanted me at the cottage if he had to lie to keep me there. A-and I know it could be nothing but for me, that's everything. So I stopped crying and found a shop. The cashier was a young woman. I think she recognized —,"

"Ya tebya lublyu." Ilya would've died if he had held it in for a second longer. He descends a step lower.

"— me. I might have fucked up the lie."

"Ya tebya lublyu."

"Wha—," Shane blinks. "What? Y-you love me?"

Ilya is pretty sure he spoke in Russian. He doesn't dwell on it for long, desperate to hold Shane again. He descends the rest of the steps to Shane. It's too brief to qualify as a chase but it will do for now. "I love you. I have loved you for so long." Shane's eyes go wider with each word. "Probably from the first time I saw you."

"We were eight."

"Yes. I have loved you since we were only eight. I should have shown it more. I think I should have probably talked to you more. I hurt you based on my assumptions. I made us suffer for so long."

"No, Ilya—,"

"Shane, please let me apologize to you. I want to be a better husband."

"Fiancé," Shane quickly shoots back.

"Fuck, Shane." Ilya gathers him into his arms. Tucks him closer and closer. Shane clings back, plastic rustling between his fingers. Ilya feels as if he's floating. Unburdened. He'd be a fool to ever let Shane walk again. "Я люблю тебя больше, чем можно выразить словами. Я люблю тебя всё больше с каждым днём."

"Придурок, ты мог бы сказать это до того, как у меня развилась мигрень от плача," Shane replies.

That was definitely Russian. Ilya holds him at arm's length, jaw almost on the floor. "What? Did you— you speak Russian now?"

Shane's smile is big. He shrugs. "I took some lessons."

"Wh— ho— what?" He sputters. "Some? You have no accent. How long have you been learning?"

"Nineteen. I thought knowing Russian would make you like me again."

“Oh, God.” Ilya pulls him back in. “I am so sorry. I am sorry. I was stupid. I have no excuse. It was my fault. It was all my fault. I love you.”

“I can’t breathe, Ilya.”

“Sorry.” He releases Shane just enough to take his wrist and lead him back into their home. “I need to clear up some things first. Svetlana is just a friend. We had sex but— nooo Shanya,” he croons when he sees Shane’s drawn brows and flaring nostrils. “It was just once when I was nineteen. I should’ve been clearer. I love her but not like I love you.”

“So you were not going to have a real wedding with her?”

Ilya chuckles. Shane’s glare shuts him up. “Sorry sorry.” He backs Shane into the wall, satisfied when he’s finally locked between the glass and himself. “What you heard was about you. I was going to ask you to marry me again.”

“Yes?” Shane’s smile is back. Small and shy. “W-would you have gotten on one knee?”

“Is that what you want?”

“I’ve always wondered what it’d feel like to be on the receiving end of that. N-not that I thought about it much.” His blush says otherwise.

“I would get on one knee. Both knees if you want, like good Russian boy, and beg you to marry me.”

“I’d say yes.” Shane touches Ilya’s waist with the hand holding the plastic bag.

“Okay, baby, I am so happy right now but I have to ask, what is in the bag?”

“Oh,” Shane drops it to the floor like he didn’t realize he was still holding on to it. “It’s just— strawberries. It was my backup plan if you didn’t want to be boyfriends.”

“You were going to ask me to be your boyfriend?” Ilya is so fond. “That is a downgrade, no? We were engaged.”

“I didn’t know how much you were willing to give.”

Ilya would spend an eternity atoning for making Shane feel so undeserving. He bumps their foreheads together, exhaling when warm hands cradle his face. “I’d give you anything, Shanya. I’ll show you how good I can be.”

Shane hums, eyes closed. “This feels like a dream. But I know it’s not because even in my dreams, you wouldn’t touch me.”

“Fuck. I’m so sorry. Dream me is an asshole. I am an asshole.”

“It’s okay. I forgive you. Do you forgive me too?”

Ilya nods. A little movement of his forehead against Shane's. They stay close like this for a while, heads touching and noses bumping. "So strawberry smoothies, hmm?" Ilya says softly. "You trust it that much?"

"It won you over before."

"Your smoothies did not win me over, Shanya. You did. I think you had me from the moment you smiled at me."

Shane's eyes are cloudy again. Or maybe it's Ilya's. He reaches, knuckles deep, into Ilya's hair, their lips hovering inches apart. "Are you as happy as I am now?"

"Happiest."

Shane crashes their lips together.

Chapter End Notes

That brings us to the end of another fic. Please let me know what you think. Until next time, ciao 

Update: I added an extra chapter   

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

You asked and I listened. An extra chapter of our sweet chaotic babies. I hope you like it



Shane paces his hotel room under the watchful eyes of his two friends, Rose and Hayden, redolent of the day of his first wedding six months ago. Only this time, his shoes and jacket stay on.

The past four and a half months have been nothing short of spectacular. After braving another rejection and returning to Ilya at the cottage, life has been somewhat simpler.

Ilya apologized with kisses and promised to be better.

And he was.

Shane woke up the next morning to three crates of eggs on the granite counter.

“Big Russian boyfriend, bought you eggs.”

It was just eggs. But it’s what they represented that brought tears to his eyes. Shane sat atop the counter and looked pretty while Ilya made breakfast, chatting his ears off about all the things he’d wanted to share with him during their years apart.

He told Ilya about working with his parents, slowly preparing to take over from David in less than 5 years, since his parents intend to retire and enjoy the wealth they've amassed.

“Do you like it?”

“What?”

Ilya wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “Working with them.”

“Yes. Numbers are simple. They calm me.”

“Nerd.”

“Shut up.”

Shane prattled on throughout breakfast, pausing only to smack a kiss on Ilya’s pouted lips every five or ten minutes. It’s ridiculous. He loved it. He loved Ilya.

“You are so cute when you talk, Shanya. Still the same, always the same.”

“Well, you’re always cute.”

“You cannot outdo me. I forbid it.”

**

While Shane was so conscious of speaking Russian in the past, unsure of Ilya’s reaction, these days he let himself go, startling Ilya whenever a Russian word slipped out.

“I keep forgetting you can do that,” Ilya said. He was resting on the dock, arms folded behind his head and eyes small against the harsh lights of the sun. The sunscreen Shane forcefully smeared over him left a white cast giving him a slightly ghostly look. “So every time I spoke in Russian, you understood?”

Shane nodded, swinging his legs back and forth over the edge. “Every time. I mean, after eighteen at least.”

“So when we—,”

“Yep.” Shane chuckled at the sudden pink flooding Ilya’s face. “Every time you called me a pet name, I understood.”

“Ughhh I will die now.”

Shane lay beside him and rested his cheek on Ilya’s protruding arm. “It made me happy. Momentarily.”

“I do not get it. If you understood all that, how did you not know I was in love with you?”

“I thought you did when you said it. I figured you probably liked Svetlana and me. That’s why I came up with a solution but you— uhm, you know how that went. And then after that, I was convinced you only said those sweet things because we were fucking. Sex makes people say lots of things, right?”

Ilya’s eyes softened. His unencumbered hand reached for Shane’s face, knuckles softly brushing his cheek. “I meant them. I meant everything.”

“I know.”

“And Svetlana is just a friend. But not like us. You have always been very special to me.”

Shane smiled. “I know that too. I love you.” He pressed his lips to the inside of Ilya’s arm and watched him turn redder. Shy Ilya was his favorite Ilya because he hardly ever was. “You big softie.”

“No, I am big Russian.”

“My Russian softie.”

“Hollander nooooo.”

“My little duckling.”

“I am not duckling.”

“My baby.”

“I think I like that. You can call me that.”

Shane drew closer to him, Satisfied when Ilya’s arms automatically opened to receive him. Receive his hug. His kisses. They’d wasted so many years apart. But they had many more to go.

**

They had to leave the cottage eventually. It was an order from their parents because, unsurprisingly, they knew all along that Shane and Ilya had been hiding in the cottage.

“What did you think, Shane?” Yuna sounded both calm and affronted over the phone. “You’re our only son. Of course, we know where you are at all times.”

“That’s not creepy at all. Did you put a tracker in my head?”

She huffed. “That’s a crazy insinuation.”

“You’re not denying it, mom.”

“There’s no tracker inside you. You’re just predictable. When you disappeared we knew you’d be at the cottage. The cameras in the trees overlooking the house confirmed it.”

“Mom!”

“We didn’t see any— much.”

“Mom!”

Ilya had spent the rest of the afternoon finding and destroying all five cameras. Later, when Shane went to the guest room to talk to Hayden and Rose, there was a message waiting from David.

Dad
08:00

You missed one. The white pine tree closest to the fire pit.

On the eve of their departure from the cottage, Shane could not sleep. He twisted and turned in his spot until Ilya sat up with an exhausted sigh.

“Okay, what is the plan?”

“What plan?” Shane pulls himself up and turns on a lamp. Ilya’s face glows under its beam.

“I can hear you thinking. I cannot hold you because you turn too much. And I cannot sleep if I cannot hold you.”

Shane bit his top lip. “We have to go back tomorrow.”

“Da, that is true.”

“What next?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Here, we are in a bubble. What if we work only because we are isolated from the world? What if we go back and you realize you’d rather spend time with Svetlana and Sasha than with me? What do we do after this? Do we call each other every day? I’ve never had a boyfriend.” His breath came out faster. “What is the protocol? How do we schedule visits? How do I know when you want to spend time together? How do I know any of this is real?”

“Hey Shane,” Ilya reached for him, cradling his face. “It is all real. At least for me. I don’t love you just because of cottage. I have loved you for a long time. I know what I want and what I want is boring Shane Hollander.” He paused to catch Shane’s flitting gaze. “Look at me, Shanya. For visits, I think I assumed we would move in together but if what you want is to live apart—,”

“No, I don’t want that. God no.” Shane released the breath he was holding. Tears of relief prickled his eyes. “Fuck, I want to live together. I don’t think I remember how to live apart from you. The thought was eating me up. I was so scared.”

“Is scary, yes. But you don’t have to worry anymore, hmm?” Shane nodded. “I bought a big house. Many lamps. So much space to unleash your real estate fetish.”

“I don’t have a fetish.”

“You can decorate however you want. Or I can move into your penthouse. I sell the house and we look for new house together.”

“How did you know I lived in a penthouse? We didn’t talk about things like that at meetings.”

Ilya looked away briefly. “You do not need to know.”

Shane’s nerves were completely gone. He nuzzled into Ilya’s warm touch. “You’ve been keeping tabs.”

“Maybe. Probably. Had to make sure Rose Landry was not living in my husband’s house. Or Miles.”

“Jesus Christ, Ilya! I haven’t seen or spoken to Miles since that night.”

Ilya put on a big grin. It was unfair that even his irrational jealousy was charming. They were not too different in this regard. Shane kissed the smile off his lips. Ilya sighed into his mouth, pulling him even closer until they almost became one.

“So?” Ilya whispered. “Your place or mine?”

“Yours. I’ve always wanted to see where you lived.”

Ilya hugged him so tightly and only let go when Shane started gasping for breath.

**

The meeting with their parents came two days after Shane moved all his belongings into Ilya’s house (our house, malysh).

“You’re too old to pull irresponsible and disgraceful stunts like this.” Grigori sat across from them. His face was set in an angry scowl and vile words spilled from his lips in Russian. “You are a disappointment to us all. Do you think your mother would be proud of you?”

Ilya bowed his head, contrite. He looked so small and Shane momentarily lost control of himself. Every anger he’d harbored toward Grigori since Ilya first told him about his abuse rose to the surface like oil on water.

“Don’t talk to him like that.”

At first, there was silence in the dining hall. Then Grigori’s already mangled face twisted. “What?”

“I said,” Shane steadied his voice and enunciated the Russian words. “Do not talk to my husband like that. He’s not your punching bag.”

“Shane, baby.” Yuna started but Shane spoke over her.

“What you call discipline is just abuse. Ilya was just a child! You hit a child! That’s the most disgraceful thing anyone could do. You are his father! What kind of parent hits his child? Do you think you should feel proud of yourself? Do you think you deserve any pride at all?”

Grigori was livid. “Who do you think you are talking to, boy?”

“Say one more word and I swear you’ll never speak to him again. I’ll take him so fucking far away and this time when we leave, we will not return.”

Grigori opened his mouth but nothing came out. His face was the color of blood and his old lips trembled pathetically. Even with all his misplaced pride, he must have recognized Shane meant every word he said. He must have known how important Ilya was to the family legacy he stooped so low to preserve.

Ilya took Shane’s hand under the table and squeezed. His lips were not smiling but his eyes did. “Let’s eat, kotenok.”

Yuna nodded at Shane. David was wearing a small smile. Even Alexei looked up from his plate, happy to understand the language around the table for once. Shane saw something akin to approval in Alexei's eyes but it might have been imagined. Not that he needed Alexie's approval to begin with.

Back in the safety of their home, Ilya crowded Shane against the door right after it shut behind them. He kissed Shane's clothed shoulder and then his clavicle and then his neck, where he buried his face and inhaled deeply.

"That was so hot." He muffled, lips cold against Shane's neck. "Very sexy. Thank you. I love you."

"I love you too." His fingers sank into Ilya's hair. Guided him up for a kiss. But before their lips would meet, Shane caught a tear sliding down Ilya's face. "Ilyusha."

"Sorry."

"Shhh." Shane kissed his lips and pulled him back into his chest. "It's okay. Everything is okay now."

Later, Shane learned that he was the first to ever stand up to Grigori in defense of Ilya. "Mama loved me but I think she was too afraid to say anything. And Alexei always wanted Papa's approval."

"I'd fight a battalion for you."

"You would lose but yes, thank you."

"You're such an asshole."

"Hmm, my cute husband. Small but powerful."

It was Shane's turn to get teary. His chest filled with joy whenever Ilya casually called back to something in the past.

"I love you," Shane said, voice thicker than he would like.

"I love you more."

"Not possible."

"Too possible."

"Okay, I'll let you win this round."

**

Shane tagged along to one of Ilya's parties. It was fun for all twenty minutes and then he wanted to go home. It was unlike the chill parties Rose dragged him to.

Everyone wanted a piece of Ilya.

They tugged on his arm to take a shot, to take a picture, to meet someone else, to introduce his husband. This was excessively overwhelming as Ilya's arm was hooked around Shane's for the entire time.

Their night came to an abrupt end when an audacious man attempted to steal Shane from Ilya's side.

"Maybe we shouldn't do that again." Shane broke the silence in the car, his knuckles white against the steering wheel.

Ilya hummed. "Very tiring, yes? That is why I wanted to stay home and cuddle with my pretty husband in our big bed."

"Sorry. I know you like partying. I just wanted us to do something you enjoyed. You've stayed in every night since we returned from the cottage."

"Not true. We go to charity gala. We go to fancy restaurant. Go to movies. Play padel with Rose Landry and Sveta. Hang out with Jackie and her baby."

Shane ignored Ilya's obvious exclusion of Hayden. "But it's not the same."

"Parties are fun sometimes. Not always. I went to parties mostly to get you off my mind. You are very hard to forget, Hollander."

Shane's heart clenched. He hated the reminder that he hurt Ilya, intentionally or not. "Sorry."

"Ah no. Don't be. You are here with me now. I do not need parties anymore. I'm happy. Much too happy. When I feel like going to a party, I will tell you, okay?"

"Okay." Shane stepped on the accelerator. Not too much to break any laws. "Let's get home quickly. I promise to cuddle the hell out of you."

**

Their first fight after the cottage was over something so insignificant that Shane could not remember the cause two weeks after the incident. But he was so irritated that he spent a sleepless night in his childhood bedroom. He was up before 5 am, eager to get back to Ilya.

Back at home, Ilya looked worse than he did. Ramped shirt, disheveled hair, tired eyes. Shane said nothing. He simply shuffled into Ilya's arms, exhaling when Ilya hugged him back. They stumbled onto a couch and fell asleep in a tangled mess of limbs.

That night, Ilya came home with a small velvet box that looked even tinier against his large hand. He stood awkwardly at the foot of the bed and proffered it to Shane.

Shane abandoned the book he was reading. "What's that?"

“Is ring.” He shrugged. “You don’t want it, I will take it back.” He was atypically fidgety but his face was a study in nonchalance.

“Ilyusha? Are you proposing?”

His mask fell apart. “Y-yes? I mean, if you still want. Your finger is empty and yet I call you my husband. We are not legally married. You could leave at any moment and I cannot do anything. You could find someone easier. Last night, I kept thinking that maybe I should have proposed already. I have thought of different ways but nothing feels right. I just—,” Ilya thrust the box forward. “Please take this for now. Wear my ring until I find a more fitting way to ask you to be mine forever.”

“Ilya—,”

“Please say yes, please.”

“Yes. It was always going to be yes. With or without a ring. Legal or not.” Shane crawled to the foot of the bed. “Yes, I’ll wear your ring.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Ilya sniffed. Rubbed his eyes. “Okay, I will kneel now.”

“Okay.” Shane chuckled, not maliciously, at the display of awkwardness.

“Pardon me. I am nervous. First time proposing to love of my life.” He got on one knee and flipped the box open. A black ring with serpentine gold details sat beautifully in the center. “Shane Hollander, will you make me the happiest man on earth by being my husband?”

“Yes.” Shane held out his hand, shocked to see the tremor in them. Ilya was trembling too but when he took Shane’s hand, they both felt steady. Two broken souls, merging into a whole.

Shane could not let Ilya win so easily. He found the jeweler the next day through investigative journalism (Rose and Svetlana), and requested the same ring in Ilya’s size.

He picked it up two weeks later, quivering with excitement as he walked through the door. He made pasta for dinner and poured Ilya’s favorite vodka brand.

“Is today my birthday?”

“Don’t you know your birthday?”

“You’re mean, Hollander.”

“Sorry. I’m nervous. I think I understand what you felt that day. I know you love me but this is all still so disconcerting.”

“I don’t know that word.”

“Uh— страшный?”

Ilya wore a look of concern. “You are okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m perfect, actually.” He breathed deeply and let it out slowly. “I love you, Ilya Rozanov. Loved you even before I knew your name. I heard your laugh and knew it was a sound that I wanted to hear for as long as I lived.” He laughed shakily. “I cleared out my closet space for you. I wanted to keep you so badly that I cried whenever I was reminded that I couldn’t. I learned your language to understand you better. I shaped my heart to fit you better. And now, by some divine intervention, you’re mine. I wish I could tell an eight-year-old Shane that we get to keep Ilyusha. Or an eighteen-year-old Shane that love does come back eventually. They would be so happy.” Shane choked on his tears. Ilya rose from his seat, chair scraping against the tiles, and kneeled by Shane’s side. “I am so happy.”

“Malysh.” Ilya wiped away Shane’s tears. “You cannot cry. You will make me cry.”

“These are tears of joy.”

“I know. But my heart cannot take it, hmm?”

“I love you.”

“I know this. I love you too.”

Shane pulled out the ring from his breast pocket. Ilya was already kneeling by his side so it took some maneuvering to kneel too. Ilya’s eyes bulged when he realized what was happening.

“You are proposing.”

“Yes.”

“Same ring?”

“Identical, yes. I figured we should have matching rings before matching beach shirts.”

“Fuck, you are perfect, Hollander. This is perfect. You beat me at proposal.”

“It’s not a competition.” But if it was, he won indeed.

Ilya held out his left hand impatiently. Shane slipped the ring onto his finger and watched with delight as Ilya held his hand at eye level and turned it over repeatedly in wonder.

“I will outdo your wedding vows.” Ilya’s promise sounded like a threat. “I must win.”

“You can try.”

“Shannneeeee.” Ilya whined. “Let me win.”

“Only if you come here and kiss me.”

“Easy win.”

**

Now, two months later, just four hours to their wedding, Shane’s anxiety has successfully wiped out all the reassurances Ilya has been drilling into him. His friends’ eyes chase him around the room. They seem exhausted, past the point of telling Shane that his fiancé of 25 years has not run away again.

A knock on the door freezes Shane’s steps. He looks to his friends and gets a freakishly synchronized shrug. The knock comes again, louder. Rose sighs and gets up from the windowsill. It’s the same spot she sat six months ago. Now, the liveliness of the summer has been replaced with heaps of snow and Christmas lights that never got taken down. It’s still beautiful. A beautiful sight to get married to, he hopes.

“What are you doing here?” Rose asks the person behind the door. She sneaks a glance at Shane. “You’re not supposed to see the groom before the wedding.”

“Is stupid rule.” Shane hears Ilya’s voice clearly now. He smiles and starts toward the door.

Hayden grabs his arm. “No, buddy.”

“Let me see my husband, Rose Landry. Are you jealous I won? You want to give my Shanya keys to your broken car again?”

She scoffs looking back at Shane and Hayden in disbelief. Ilya uses that moment to let himself in. Shane’s heart stumbles at the sight of him. Lean, tall, handsome, and clad in a suit tailored to his body. Ilya’s eyes travel across Shane’s body too, heaving a shaky breath.

“You look amazing,” Ilya says.

“So do you.”

They fall into each other like unlike poles, drawn together by a force beyond any ken.

“You know this is a taboo, right?” Svetlana, who must have tried and failed to stop Ilya, pipes from the entrance.

“Come on, all the possible bad things have already happened to us.” Ilya shrugs. “We have used up all our universal curses.”

“Not funny, Ilya.” Shane admonishes while fighting a smile.

“Kind of funny, yes?”

“A little. What are you doing here?”

“Missed you. Too much. I could not wait to see you.”

“Missed you too,” Shane whispers, conscious of their friends watching them. “I wanted to come to you but Rose and Hayden would not let me.”

“They are jealous of us. I am marrying Rose Landry's ex-boyfriend and Hayden's crush.”

“Shane and I were never together!”

“I'm straight!”

Rose and Hayden exclaim simultaneously. Ilya ignores them and demands that everyone leaves the room. They mutter curses but comply after a small nod from Shane. He's drawn into a deep kiss even before the door shuts. His toes curl in his shoes like a teenager and he finds himself desperately chasing Ilya's lips as he pulls away.

Ilya takes pity on him and presses their lips together again. It's a softer, longer kiss.
“Shanya.”

“Hmm?”

“I came because I got your hundred messages asking if I'm okay. Are you okay?”

Shane nods. “Fine. I was just nervous.”

“Is normal to be nervous on wedding day. Unless you changed your mind—,”

“No no it's not that. I was nervous because the last time we did this, we bailed on each other. And I guess we never talked about that so I got a little scared that it might happen again.”

“Never. You are stuck with me for life. We are already married, Shanya.” He caresses the ring on Shane's finger. “This is just a little ceremony with friends and family to make it official. I will not leave you again.”

“Same. I uh—,” Shane thumbs at the corner of his eye to push back his burgeoning tears. “I mean, I won't leave you again. It was stupid the first time.”

“But necessary, yes?”

Running off to the cottage saved them a lifetime of resentment and misery. They needed time to forgive one another. To relearn what love means. To love each other less obsessively (they haven't managed that yet). And to communicate better.

“Yes.” Shane's voice is a whisper. “Ya tebya lublyu.”

Ilya smiles softly. “Je t'aime à la folie.” His accent is thick and he messes up the pronunciation but Shane's heart is so full he trembles slightly with how much he feels for the man standing before him. “I practiced to say at ceremony but I could not wait.”

“You're perfect.”

“I know.” Ilya walks Shane toward the bed. The back of Shane’s knees hit the frame and he falls back into the mattress, laughing as Ilya’s steady weight settles over him.

“You’ll rumble my suit.”

“I will rumble you.” He nibbles a kiss into Shane’s neck.

“That makes no sense.” Shane giggles, barely putting up a fight. He, in fact, turns his neck to give Ilya better access. Moans when Ilya’s teeth gently sink into the flesh.

Ilya leans back to inspect his creation. Smiles proudly. “Good. Now everyone will know that Shane Hollander is mine.”

Yes. “Yours.”

End Notes

Heyyyy I'm back with another one.

I'm a product of colonization yada yada yada 😂 I hope you enjoy this meal cause I loved cooking it.

Ps: I'm not operating on hr timelines. Now = 2026

Let me know what you think of the first chapter and if you wanna see more ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!