

Another Home

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Another Home

by [broccolicheddarchicken](#)

Summary

Canada had given him his life as he knew it, but it had never felt one hundred percent comfortable, either. He missed Russia sometimes, but it didn't have the thing that mattered most. Ilya had exactly one home, and it was this: his face pressed into a smooth chest, his head tucked under a strong jaw, with freckled arms wrapped around him and delicate fingers combing through his hair. Anywhere else was a temporary excursion.

A treatise on second (and third) languages, homesickness, acceptance, Shane's struggle learning Russian, and the things people do when they care.

A rewrite of *Plentiful, but Ultimately Finite*.

Notes

Tw: overt homophobia, mention of suicide. Both are at a level typical to the source material.

This fic is a rewrite of the first fic I wrote for this fandom, [Plentiful, but Ultimately Finite](#). While I'm still very proud of that fic and love it dearly, I've been thinking for a while that it could probably be improved. This is my attempt at taking that fic and making it better, now that I've been writing about these two blockheads for more than a year. It's not a *full* rewrite, so there are several scenes that are nearly identical, but it's enough of a change that I felt it warranted being posted as a separate work. There's about 1700 words of brand-new writing, without considering the things I cut/changed.

Also, don't worry, I'm not going to delete the original fic. If you prefer it, it will still be there.

As always, I hope you enjoy reading this at least half as much as I enjoyed ~~writing~~ rewriting it. <3

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

Russian was a difficult language for an English speaker to learn--at least, Ilya assumed so. English had been exceedingly hard for him and he figured it was probably the same the other way around. The alphabet was entirely different, the pronunciations were foreign and confusing. He'd been speaking it for more than ten years and got daily practice with native speakers, yet he was still occasionally dropping his articles and mixing up prepositions. He had long since come to terms with the fact that he'd always have a bit of an accent, even if it wasn't as thick as it used to be. With how much Shane adored it, he didn't have the motivation to fully get rid of it, anyway.

Ilya had made a lot of progress, though. He hardly ever mentally translated anymore. Most of the time nowadays, he thought in English, which was a weird development he wasn't sure how he felt about even years later. Very rarely, in a session with Galina, he'd even find that he was more comfortable expressing a certain emotion in English than Russian.

When Ilya first moved to North America, it had been hard. His accent was heavy, he spoke slowly, and he had to ask people to repeat themselves or rephrase often. They weren't always very patient with him. Perhaps Ilya was biased, but he didn't understand why strangers were so comfortable being rude to him just because he'd struggled with his second language. Certain people were standoffish to him just for being Russian, which also felt unnecessary. He knew logically that Americans and Canadians didn't have the warmest impression of Russians, but Ilya hadn't even been to his home country in years. If Canada had required him to renounce his Russian citizenship, he'd have done it without a moment's thought.

Ilya missed Russia, but it wasn't home anymore. It hadn't been for years.

Shane had been different. From the very start he'd been different--always gentle, always kind. He'd never once made Ilya feel stupid. Not for making a mistake with his English, not for any other reason. When Ilya didn't understand a word, phrase, or idiom, Shane would explain it right away. Even when they argued, if Ilya was struggling to articulate himself, Shane would still help him find the word he was looking for. Right in the middle of the fight, just as gently as if it were pillow talk. Too sweet for his own good.

Whenever Ilya brought Russia up, even years before they were together, Shane seemed distrusting, but not in a judgemental way. Ilya could tell Shane harbored some distaste for the way Ilya's home country had treated him. Even now that they were married, Shane was on eggshells whenever the topic came up. It was the only bit of Ilya that Shane didn't know firsthand, and Ilya had slowly, carefully been attempting to show it to him over the last few years.

The vulnerability was scary, but Shane protected it as much as he could.

Moscow was behind him. Ilya knew it, the same way he still knew its winding streets, its colorful summers and brutal winters. He still carried some love for the country that raised him. It was at the very core of him, completely irremovable, even if his passport was now blue. He didn't just miss the simple comforts, like good vodka and familiar food, but the

places themselves and the people who lived in them. The baroque-style spires stretching above his head until he had to tilt his neck back to follow them, the urban skyline reflecting off the river as it wound through the city center, the bright jewel tones and historic weight of the Red Square. Alexei and Larisa, the married couple who ran the coffee shop he used to go to in the mornings before practice. His elderly neighbor, Mikhail, who walked to the park with birdseed every afternoon to feed the bullfinches and warblers. Dasha, his very first girlfriend, who convinced him to grow out his hair and broke up with him because she was going to Italy that summer. He'd have to send her a thank-you basket. He was pretty sure Shane only married him for his curls.

Ilya knew she probably wouldn't want to receive it. Russia didn't hold much love for him, nowadays.

When Ilya got too wrapped up in his own head, about where home was and what he missed and how complicated the journey to Ottawa had been, he reminded himself of two things.

First, he could hold on to the good things, even if they were over now. Nobody could take the warm memories from him, the ones he cherished like a nostalgic old coat.

Second, the bad things didn't matter anymore, not even in the slightest. The life Ilya had built for himself was his greatest fantasy come to fruition. He spoke English fluently, and he had for years. He was a Canadian citizen, and there were consequences in Canada for mistreating someone over who they loved. He was the second-best active player in the NHL, not that he'd ever admit it. He was one of the greatest hockey players in history. His name was on the Stanley Cup two times. Both times, it was the first listed. Captain's privilege.

Sometimes even that wasn't quite enough to pull Ilya out of his thoughts. On those increasingly rare occasions, Ilya simply remembered the wonderful life he'd been gifted once he'd worked through all the turmoil.

Ilya Rozanov had a husband, and he was *everything* to him. An adoring husband who looked at him like Ilya had personally hung the stars in the sky for his enjoyment. A husband who was generous and kind and made Ilya fall so deeply in love that he'd rearranged his entire life's priorities to protect their relationship. A husband who was raising a dog with him and would eventually raise his children. Probably soon—they talked about it a lot. Who was learning Russian for him. Who he got to win hockey games with. Who had never judged him for struggling, who loved him exactly as he was, and who always met him where he was at.

Canada had given him his life as he knew it, but it had never felt one hundred percent comfortable, either. He missed Russia sometimes, but it didn't have the thing that mattered most. Ilya had exactly one home, and it was this: his face pressed into a smooth chest, his head tucked under a strong jaw, with freckled arms wrapped around him and delicate fingers combing through his hair. Anywhere else was a temporary excursion.

The kitchen carried the bitter scent of fresh coffee mixed with the sharpness of red chili flakes as Ilya sprinkled the spice container over the avocado. Ilya was going to spread it on some toast and top it all with poached eggs. He loved cooking for himself and Shane—he loved taking care of him. Shane was in his own world, scribbling away in a Russian workbook at the breakfast table. They'd shared a thousand mornings just like this one.

Shane practiced his Russian in a lot of different ways. Talking with Ilya was the main one, but sometimes he'd get too nervous or embarrassed, and so he'd practice by himself. He told Ilya that he loved listening to podcasts, or music in playlists Ilya had made him.

This album was my favorite as a teenager, you're going to love it.

Sometimes, Ilya would show him shows he used to watch with English subtitles put on, or he'd play video games with Russian support while Shane did something or other on his laptop.

Sometimes, though, things like grammar or vocabulary were best studied on paper and applied in conversation later. That was where the books came in. Ilya was very invested in his husband's Russian education, so when Shane brought him a list of Russian-language workbooks he was considering buying, Ilya had carefully appraised each one.

No, no, that one will teach you to talk like a Soviet history professor who is like a million years old. You don't want that one. Buy this one instead.

Once the workbooks were approved, purchased, and had arrived at their doorstep, Ilya had watched Shane cut the box open with glee. Shane said he wanted to get started right away, so Ilya figured that Shane was about to study with them.

No. What a ridiculous assumption. Instead, Shane spent a full two hours just looking through the first booklet. He considered the exercises within and how long he estimated they'd take him, then his own schedule. Then he set realistic goals for which chapters he wanted to finish by what dates.

For his part, Ilya had observed this entire process from the other end of the couch, during a particularly productive playoff run in *NHL 2022*. Shane was so systematic and studious, it was adorable. Ilya hadn't worked half as hard at learning English, and his entire livelihood had depended on it.

Ilya smiled warmly—first at the memory, then at Shane—as he dug a fork out of the cutlery drawer. Shane was just doing a few casual pages before breakfast. He had no idea that it meant the world to Ilya.

Sometimes, Ilya was convinced that Shane was completely oblivious to the world around him. Perhaps that was a bit harsh. He wasn't completely unobservant, of course, but he had this habit of getting lost into the task at hand that Ilya had never quite been able to match. His whole life, Ilya had been on high alert, eyes darting and ears perked to take stock of every room.

There were benefits, though, like the fact that Ilya had been basically staring at Shane as he studied for nearly five minutes, and Shane hadn't noticed. Ilya loved watching. He loved seeing Shane's brow furrow in concentration, the serious expression his face would take up, the way his eyes would narrow when he hit a particularly difficult exercise, as though it were trying to trick him specifically.

Ilya looked down and smashed the avocado with a fork, and when he looked back up, Shane's nose was wrinkled in disgust, his freckles disappearing into the creases at the corners of his eyes. He had been trying to be subtle about his observation, but that expression was simply too cute not to ask about.

"What did you just read?"

"What?"

Ilya mashed the spices into the avocado. "There was something in the book. Something you did not like. What was it?"

"Oh. According to this chart in here, the English equivalent of your name is Elijah," Shane said with a frown.

"Equiv-a-what?"

"Equivalent," Shane said, emphasizing the pronunciation, syllable by syllable. "It means two things that are equal to each other. Basically, if I were to translate 'Ilya' into English, the name would be 'Elijah'."

Ilya's lips curled up. "Okay. What's so wrong with that?"

"You're not an Elijah. You're an Ilya."

"Yes. I have never gone by Elijah. I did not even know that was the *equivalent* until five seconds ago."

Shane huffed. "Fuck off, asshole. I just mean, like—"

Shane cut himself off and turned back to the book, a scowl on his face. "Like in elementary school, in my French class, I had to go by Jean because that's technically the French version of my name."

Ilya took a break from the avocado to sip his coffee. "You took French in school? Haven't you been speaking it since you were two?"

"Okay, well, in Canada everyone takes French. We take it as a subject, and then eventually you have to take it as a subject *and* take a different class that's taught in French. Mine was history."

Ilya was impressed. "They really prioritize your fluency."

"Yeah, it's fucking Canada, Ilya."

Ilya had to put in real effort to hold back a laugh.

“*Anyway*—I had to go by Jean in my French class, so I was just thinking how gross it would be if you took an English class, and they made you go by Elijah. Or what if when you immigrated, you decided to change your name to make it easier for people to pronounce, or whatever?” Shane pulled a face again. “I don’t think I would’ve fallen for you if you introduced yourself to me as Elijah.”

Ilya faux-gasped. “That is very mean, Shane. I thought you loved me for *me*.”

“I do now, but you were a huge dick back then. Remember? I’d never have let you fuck me if it weren’t for that sexy accent.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow, unbelieving. Shane had never been able to be anything but very attracted to him, even when Ilya kept his mouth shut. Probably more so with his mouth shut.

“I don’t think so. I think I would’ve gotten you on your knees either way.”

“I’m going to correct myself,” Shane said. “You’re still a huge dick.”

“I *have* a huge dick.”

“God, it’s like being married to a fifteen-year-old.”

Ilya ignored Shane. “Also, when did I introduce myself? You walked up to me one day while I was smoking and already knew everything about me. You were obsessed, Hollander.”

Shane rolled his eyes and turned back to his book. “Y’know what, never mind. I’m going back to my studying. Fuck you.”

Ilya laughed and began spreading the avocado mixture onto slices of toast. There was little he enjoyed more than annoying Shane. It was his passion—he couldn’t wait to retire and make it his full-time occupation.

The water Ilya had put on to boil a few minutes prior was finally rolling, so he dropped the eggs in, then meandered over to the table to see what Shane was studying. Anya whined at his feet, begging for attention, but she’d have to wait for just a moment.

“Naming conventions? That seems... niche.” Ilya sipped his coffee.

“Who taught you ‘niche’?”

“You did. Talking about the queer bookstore downtown.”

“Oh. Right. Well, anyway, I’ve been learning this language for years. I’d hope they’d start teaching me *niche* things.”

Ilya smiled at the page, then set his coffee down and picked up the dog. She was probably too big to be carried, but she always seemed to love it, and Ilya didn’t mind. He pet the soft fur

on the top of her head as he spoke. “You have learned a lot, moya lyubov. I am very proud of you.”

“Well, not enough. I still have a long way to go. You’re way better at English than I am at Russian.”

Ilya held back a snicker. “Is there anything you can be not competitive about?”

“Nope,” Shane said, popping the end of the word. He was so cute. Ilya couldn’t resist ruffling his hair with one hand, and Shane went on. “This unit’s all about communicating with friends, family, partners and loved ones,” he said.

Shane looked up at him again, a shy smile on his face. “Very important, in my case.”

Ilya’s heart swelled so much that he wasn’t entirely sure what to do with the excess, so he leaned down and kissed Shane’s forehead. He was so grateful. He was so grateful it hurt, sometimes.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” he whispered before he stood back up.

Shane blushed. “Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu.” Ilya was a lucky man—that was one of Shane’s most comfortable phrases.

Reluctantly, Ilya set Anya down and went back to the kitchen, and Shane turned back to the book. “They have your name in the conversion chart, but not the chart with the diminutives. That’s too bad, I wanted to call you nicknames.”

“I guess you will have to actually read the lesson and figure out how to construct them. No cheating.”

Shane laughed.

Ilya was lounging next to the pool, fidgeting with his crucifix, and the high was wearing off.

They’d only been at Shane’s cabin for three days now—no, their cabin, they were married—and somehow, the high of winning the Stanley Cup on the same team as Shane Hollander was already wearing off.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t still happy—he was. By God, he was. It was just that every award or broken record or Stanley Cup win made Ilya wish more than usual that he could call his mother. His father had been dead for years, but it’s not like he’d cared before then. He hadn’t spoken to his brother since 2017. He could be dead too, for all Ilya knew, and Ilya wouldn’t be particularly upset if he were.

His mother, though.

You are so determined, Ilyushenka. So graceful. You look like a figure skater on the ice. I can't wait to see you on TV when you grow up. You'll make us all so proud.

She never did end up seeing him play on TV.

That was before Ilya had even fully committed to hockey as his life's path. Before he realized that the only way to escape his brother's indifference and his father's ire was to put on skates and pads and waste entire days panting on ice. He practiced until his feet bled, because his father wouldn't pay for the right size skates until he made juniors.

He wasn't nearly as talented then, and she treated him like he'd already struck gold. His soft, brave, young, beautiful mother.

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut to ward off both the bright sun and his wandering mind. This train of thought wasn't going to be good for him, he knew that. He didn't avoid thinking about his mother, but he could tell this specific line would end with the mental image of a wrist hanging limp from the edge of a bed, and he *did* try to avoid thinking about that.

Ilya was alone. Shane had gone to the grocery store. He'd asked Ilya if he wanted to come, but Ilya had declined. *Working on my tan, sweetheart. All for you.*

The truth was that Ilya was feeling too tired to bother with the store. Now he wished he had gone. He hadn't expected Shane leaving to make him feel so deflated.

He tried to focus on the good. He'd won his second championship, and it was a first in so many ways. His first since leaving Boston. The first in franchise history for the Centaurs. Shane and Ilya's first together, as husbands.

During game seven, Ilya scored twice, and Shane scored once. Ilya's second goal had tied them against Los Angeles, saving them from a loss and sending them into overtime. It had been off an assist from Shane, which almost felt better than the first time he'd actually hoisted the cup. He wanted to press him against the boards and kiss him right there, but no. They had to finish the game first.

Later, when Shane scored the game-winning goal in overtime, Ilya went fucking berserk. He might've blacked out, he wasn't sure. All he remembered was skating over to Shane faster than he thought he was capable of. If he'd skated like that at the skills competition, Shane would've lost. He remembered ripping off his helmet, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist, and kissing the *hell* out of him. The clip certainly didn't get replays on ESPN, but it should've. That kiss could've won Olympic medals. He wanted to send a signed photo of it to Roger Crowell. Even better—a video on one of those smart frames.

Ilya wondered absently what the Russian newspapers had to say about their win. He'd never checked them since getting outed, because he knew it would just make him unhappy. They didn't want to celebrate his accomplishments anymore. He was no longer something Russia was proud of. He knew any time he excelled would simply be used as an excuse to tear him down.

Even so, he felt like he needed to know.

Ilya got up, off of the deck lounge he'd been relaxing on. He was just in his swim shorts, the ones with the five-inch inseam that always drove Shane wild. They'd been in the pool earlier, but he was dry now. He went inside and grabbed his tablet from his bag, which was currently sitting on the couch, then plopped himself down next to it. After settling himself comfortably in the throw pillows and resting the tablet on his stomach, he pressed the button in the corner of the keyboard that switched it from English characters to the Russian Cyrillic alphabet.

He pulled up one of the most popular Russian sports news sites, tapped into the search bar, and typed "Илья Розанов" without pressing enter.

It was still a little strange, sometimes. To see the words "Ilya Rozanov" and know that they were meant to refer to him. That was not the name he'd seen on the ranking boards when he played in juniors, or on the tags of birthday gifts wrapped by his grandmother, or on the top of his schoolwork as a child. It was like hearing your own voice on a recording. Recognizable, but deeply uncomfortable.

Sometimes it was okay. The Latin letters felt the warmest in Shane's neat handwriting, usually in a scrap note about something mundane and domestic. *Ilya, the leftovers are in the fridge. Love you!*

That was closer to the truth, he thought. Shane made the strange characters feel a little closer to home, but they still weren't completely right. *Ilya* was not the name his mother picked for him, it was just the closest approximation.

Ilya stared at his name in the search bar of the site for a little longer. He knew that whatever awful things they had to say about them would hurt even more, in his native tongue and with the name he'd known since childhood. He knew he shouldn't press enter.

He did.

At the very top was a page of his stats, going back to when he'd first played in the junior league as a fifteen-year-old, and covering up to the Stanley Cup final he'd played not even two weeks ago. Below that were all the articles written about him or mentioning him. There weren't as many as some other Russian athletes. Hockey was huge in Russia, but it wasn't as popular as in Canada, and the players who stayed in the KHL typically got more coverage than those who left for North America. Still, there were a significant number of them.

Ilya scrolled down and furrowed his brow. The first few articles were incredibly old, about his disastrous Olympic appearance in Sochi and his decision to play in the NHL instead of the Russian league. He quickly realized the articles were arranged by hits, so he changed the sorting method to reverse chronological.

The title that appeared at the top of the page didn't surprise him, but it still stung. *Ilya Rozanov: National hero turned national disgrace*. Against his better judgement, he tapped on the article so he could read it in full.

Immediately, Ilya's stomach turned. This wasn't just a quick little update on how gross he was for kissing a man. This was a full-on think piece. It was *long*. It was written by an editor.

Even before Ilya Rozanov made his first appearance in the MHL, he stood out. An exception was made by the league's commissioner to allow then fifteen-year-old Rozanov to play for his hometown team, despite the league bylaws mandating a minimum age of 16. In his first season, Rozanov proved the commissioner's decision correct, scoring the fourth highest number of goals in the entire league. With incredible top speed, uncanny shooting accuracy, and a self-assuredness that hasn't been seen since, Rozanov managed to outplay forwards with years of experience over him. At nineteen, he moved to the United States to show his dominance in the NHL. In just four seasons, Rozanov took the Boston Bears from last-ranked in the league to Stanley Cup champions. Russia made him our hero. We rooted for him from across the globe. He was on our cereal boxes, advertised our sneakers, and captained our Olympic team.

Why, then, has he chosen to turn his back on everything good he could have stood for?

Ilya kept reading, certain that he was going to be sick. Praises of his achievements as an athlete were laced with barely-concealed jabs about anal sex and rhapsodies on the downfall of true masculinity. Ilya had never once felt insecure about who he was, but this was very nearly getting him there. He needed to close the tablet.

He couldn't make himself do it. Despite knowing that this wasn't healthy for him, he felt an irrepressible urge to understand exactly what people back home thought of him. At least if he knew, he didn't have to wonder. Ilya kept reading, kept wishing he had the strength to close the stupid window. He was a source of shame. A joke, an embarrassment to his country. He was proof that parents of hockey prodigies should ensure their sons played for the KHL. He had once had so much promise, but America had ruined him. God, didn't his father used to say the same thing?

In his so-called "marriage" to his former rival Shane Hollander, Rozanov has proven—

That sentence—Ilya couldn't bear to finish it. He slammed the cover of the tablet shut.

Ilya scrubbed his hands over his face and tried not to think about it too hard. It was no worse than what he had been expecting. Russian culture was very traditional, the media did not accept gay men. Or bisexual men, not that the distinction mattered. It wasn't really about *him*, they were just using him to perpetuate homophobia.

It still made his chest ache. Ilya wanted to be able to visit home. He wanted to hold Shane's hand and show him all the places that mattered to him when he was a kid. He wanted to take Shane on a date in the café he'd grown up getting hot chocolate with his mother in. He wanted to take him to the community center amphitheater, hold his hand while they sat, and tell him about the horrible children's play he'd had a lead role in when he was ten. He wanted to kiss him next to the altar in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. If anything made Ilya believe in God, it was the way Shane's mouth felt moving against his.

Shane had gotten to do all those things in Ottawa. The Canadian equivalent of them, anyway. Ilya had seen his old elementary school, and the diner he used to visit to get food with his teammates after practice, and the park he used to do his ten kilometer runs in. Ilya wanted to share Moscow with Shane in the same way, but he knew he never could. He couldn't even

express his yearning for it to Shane, because he wasn't sure he had the words to describe the feeling in English.

Ilya needed a cigarette, he decided. Something to help him calm down. Still wearing nothing but a bathing suit, Ilya went upstairs. He kept a pack hidden in his nightstand drawer, inside a box of condoms that hadn't been touched in years. After grabbing it and his lighter, Ilya went outside in the front yard, leaned against the house, and lit up.

Ilya fucking loved to smoke. He loved the smell when he opened the pack, rich and nearly fruity, like dried dates. He loved the taste of it on his tongue, loved the burn in his lungs. He loved the feeling of lightness that overtook his entire body. Ilya had gone years without feeling a thing after smoking, but now that he'd more or less quit, the head rush of the first drag was back in full force.

He exhaled, slowly, watched the gray smoke disappear into the sky, and let his eyes fall shut.

It wasn't like the article had said anything Ilya hadn't been expecting. Really, it could've been much crueler. Russian media wasn't kind to the queer community, not since the extremism laws had been passed, and Russian sports media even less so.

Maybe it wasn't even the words themselves that upset Ilya. Maybe it was the realization that Ilya had wasted years of his life trying to prove himself to people who he made sick. It was the same feeling as when his father died—the understanding that his efforts had been pointless.

By the time Ilya heard the car approaching the driveway, it was too late. Shane had rounded the corner approaching the house and undoubtedly would've seen Ilya standing outside and the little white stick hanging from between his lips. Ilya didn't even bother to try to hide it—he simply watched the Cherokee approach, listening to the crunch of the tires.

Shane got out of the car and looked at Ilya, but didn't say anything. Instead, he opened the back passenger door and grabbed some groceries.

Ilya took a drag.

Shane finally began his approach, and Ilya realized he probably needed some sort of game plan. He'd be pissed, Ilya knew that much, and rightfully so. Ilya hadn't smoked since the plane incident.

"What's going on?" Shane asked once he was within range, setting the bags of groceries he had in either hand onto the paved walkway.

Ilya stared at him blankly for a moment. He wasn't expecting the gentleness radiating off of his husband, nor his searching expression.

"No lecture?"

"You seem upset."

"I'm fine. Is nothing."

Ilya took another pull from his cigarette, then turned away to exhale so that the smoke wouldn't blow in Shane's face. He knew how much Shane hated the smell.

"It's not nothing. You're smoking about it. I haven't seen you smoke in years."

"You are not observant."

Shane rolled his eyes. "*Ilya*."

Ilya sighed. He knew Shane wouldn't let it go unless Ilya explicitly told him to—and he could. Shane would respect it, he always had in the past. It wouldn't help, though, would it?

Ilya forced the words past his tongue.

"I gave them everything. Years and years and years. Anything they wanted, I did. I won them their juniors medal and I *tried* at Sochi, I really did. I won the Stanley Cup and I tried to do right by them, because it was home."

"But...?"

"But I wanted one thing for myself. One fucking thing. And they say that makes me bad, so I guess I am bad."

"What do you mean?"

"News article about us. About us winning. It's fine, it doesn't matter."

Ilya put out his cigarette against the side of the house—he'd probably get chided by Shane for that, under different circumstances—then started walking towards the car. There were more groceries to grab.

"Ilya." Shane grabbed his forearm, stopping his approach. His expression was... more than worried.

If Ilya didn't know better, he would think that Shane was afraid.

"What?" Ilya asked.

"I... you're not bad. You're great. You're the best person I know."

"People from home do not think so."

"Then they're wrong." Shane's jaw was set, his eyes hard. It was a tone that didn't broker an argument. "Because you're incredible."

Ilya didn't know how to respond to that—his every instinct was telling him to bottle up the indescribable flood of warmth that came through his body at Shane's words. He could practically hear Galina's voice in his head, asking him if he truly thought that was the best response.

“Okay.”

In an instant, Ilya was wrapped up in Shane’s arms, Shane gently tugging Ilya’s head down to rest against his shoulder. He had ten centimeters of height and ten kilos of weight on his husband, but Shane had an impossible knack for making him feel small and safe when needed.

Ilya closed his eyes and nuzzled Shane. He smelled like the expensive bergamot body wash he used. His t-shirt was soft, and the bare skin of his neck was warm against Ilya’s cheek.

“I’m sorry for smoking,” Ilya murmured.

“It’s okay.” Shane worked his fingers through Ilya’s curls, blunt nails scratching lightly against his scalp. “I’m not upset.”

“You are.”

“Well. Maybe a little. For your health. But I’m not mad at you.”

“Okay.” Ilya sniffed. He could feel his throat getting tight, which was the exact opposite of what he wanted. If he didn’t move, he’d surely cry, but he couldn’t bear the thought of standing up. Not right then, with Shane stroking his back and making every problem he’d ever had feel absolutely inconsequential.

“C’mon. Let’s get the groceries put up, and then we can cuddle on the couch for a bit. I wanna hold you.”

Once the groceries had been brought inside and put away, Shane laid on his back on the couch and pulled Ilya into his arms. Ilya settled himself on Shane’s chest and shut his eyes, letting the peace of the moment drag him out of the awful mental state that article had put him in.

When he started to cry, about ten minutes later, Shane didn’t complain that he was getting his shirt wet. He just wrapped his arms around Ilya a little tighter, pressed a few soft kisses to his forehead, and murmured sweet, gentle words until Ilya felt better.

Ilya would never deserve this man. He was sure of it.

Later that night, Ilya woke up while it was still dark outside. He’d been a borderline insomniac most of his life, the sleep issues ebbing and flowing with his mental health. Ilya

had only been able to recognize how his depression factored into it sometime in the last few years, but with a retrospective lens, the pattern fit most of his adult life rather well.

It made sense that he couldn't sleep that night, then, in the midst of what Galina would've gently referred to as an *episode*.

Ilya rolled onto his side and looked at Shane, next to him in the bed. He was on his stomach, face squished against the pillow, only half-visible even with Ilya's eyes adjusted to the light. He was beautiful, always, but especially beautiful in the privacy of their bedroom, sweet in the ways only Ilya got to see.

Shane wasn't as asleep as Ilya thought. Maybe he felt Ilya shift next to him, maybe he felt Ilya's breathing change—regardless, he rolled onto his back and looked at Ilya, all bleary confusion.

"You're awake?"

"Go back to sleep."

Shane scooted closer to Ilya in the bed, nuzzling his chest. They were both shirtless—it was the hottest part of the summer—and Ilya knew Shane liked the feeling of Ilya's soft, warm chest hair against his skin.

"Come here," Ilya murmured, sliding his arm under Shane's head to act as a pillow. "I've got you."

They wriggled and resettled a bit, like they always did, until they found a position they were both comfortable in. It was a lot closer than they usually slept, but Ilya needed it, and he suspected Shane could tell.

Ilya never felt calmer than when Shane was in his arms. Shane—his heart, outside his body. The only home he had. His personal experience with grief had a horrible way of reminding him how fickle everything was, how easily he could lose the things he loved. He'd had more nightmares than he could count about Shane getting hurt. Car accidents, concussions, cancer.

When he held Shane, he knew he was safe. He knew nothing could hurt Shane without hurting him first.

The night air outside the cottage was nearly silent, a rarity for summertime. No frogs seeking mates, no insects chirping away. Ilya moved his hand up and down Shane's back. He let his hand be guided by the gentle taper, the narrow waist feeding out to the broad shoulders and back in again. Shane turned his face up and pecked the bottom of Ilya's chin, so Ilya met him halfway, and then they were kissing.

It was more than Ilya had been expecting: slow, open, deep, without boundary or hesitation. The intimate touch of the long-married, who knew each other's bodies so completely that every touch landed with its intended effect. There was a boundless vulnerability between them, something that had been in some way present since that very first hookup and had only grown stronger in the years since.

They weren't really long-married, of course, but they'd been doing this long enough to trick their bodies into believing it.

It was Ilya who took the initiative, like usual—Ilya who rolled Shane onto his back and settled over him, Ilya who kissed the places along Shane's neck that would make him whine, Ilya who caught Shane's earlobe between his teeth. He was still half-asleep, acting on animal instinct, fumbling with their clothes and savoring Shane's quiet gasps.

Then Ilya was inside Shane, Shane's pleased whimpers warm against his mouth, Shane's arms looped around his neck—and that was another home, indeed. The low ache that had been sitting in Ilya's stomach ever since first reading the article finally dissipated. Like the rest of Ilya's hurts, Shane had taken it and dulled the edges.

Shane couldn't fix Ilya, not the way Ilya knew he wished he could, but he could rob the world of its ability to inflict pain.

Sometimes, Ilya wondered why Shane was so focused on becoming fluent in Russian. While he was certainly grateful for it, he was still surprised at the level of Shane's engagement. Ilya had asked once or twice, and he'd given a lot of different reasons, mostly jokes. *I don't want you using it to say mean things about me to our kids. And I need to be able to read Russian recipes so I can cook you all those foods you miss.*

Shane was dedicated, too. They had lots of free time in the summers, and that was when most of his studying was done, but he didn't slack off during the season, either. He practiced at some point every single day, even if it was just for twenty minutes. Maybe it was a podcast during his run, or he'd read a few Russian articles in the locker room before warm-ups started. On one notable occasion, Shane had opened Duolingo on his phone not thirty seconds after Ilya had pulled his cock out of his ass.

"What? It's 11:45! I don't want to lose my streak!"

"Is this how the spark in a marriage dies? With an evil green owl watching?"

Ilya supposed one didn't become an elite professional athlete without that sort of commitment.

Stretched out on the couch with his feet in Shane's lap and the TV on, Ilya wondered how badly Shane wanted to keep up with it. Not because of any lack of effort on Shane's part, but because he seemed particularly frustrated tonight. They were watching a Russian medical comedy Ilya liked. He'd explained it to Shane as 'like *Scrubs*, but funnier'. It had English subtitles, but Shane said he wanted to really practice his listening, so Ilya kept them off. Shane was staring at the screen with his eyebrows knit together, and the only other time Ilya had seen him look so confused was when he'd lost sight of a puck.

"I—wait, what was that last word?"

"Vnimaniye. Attention."

Shane paused.

"Why did he say attention?"

Ilya needed to explain the whole joke, didn't he? He didn't mind—he couldn't, not when Shane had always been so patient about his English—but he wished Shane would just accept a tiny bit of assistance. It was still good practice, even with the subtitles.

"The patient said that she had hearing loss, so Doctor Bykov told Varya to put in the chart that she was 'moderately attractive'. Then when the patient complained, he said to add that she only said the hearing loss part for attention."

"Oh." Shane turned back to the screen and rested his forearms on Ilya's shins.

About thirty seconds passed before Shane needed help again. "Sorry, did she just ask if there was a bar in the hospital?"

Ilya turned to him before answering the question. "Are you sure you do not want me to turn on the—"

Shane cut him off. "Yes, Ilya. If I wanted you to turn on the subtitles, I would've asked you to turn on the fucking subtitles."

Oh. Well then.

Ilya didn't turn on the subtitles, and he waited. He knew it was just a matter of time—less than sixty seconds, he was sure. He didn't need to say a thing.

Ilya was right. About a minute later, Shane exhaled next to him. "I'm sorry. That was rude. I'm just... frustrated. I feel like I spend half my free time learning this language and I still can't keep up with a fucking sitcom."

Ilya sat up and scooted next to Shane, and Shane hugged his arm. He paused the show before speaking.

"Is okay. I used to get very upset with my English too. If it helps, understanding jokes was one of the hardest things for me to learn. Took a very long time."

Shane's expression softened slightly, but he still seemed upset. "How did you learn so *fast*, Ilya?"

Ilya offered a conspiratorial smile. "I didn't. I first decided to go to the NHL when I was fourteen, so I started studying more then. Also, I learned English in school as a small child. Most Russians do." He found Shane's hand with his free arm and interlaced their fingers.

"Then I came to Boston and I had no choice. Nobody here speaks Russian, except you, so if I

couldn't say something in English, it was not getting said. You would be surprised how quickly you can learn something when it is literally the only option."

"Does that mean you need to start speaking exclusively in Russian to me?"

Ilya shrugged. "If that would make you happy."

"No, I think it would just make me pissy again."

"Ah," Ilya said as he pulled Shane into his arms, tucking Shane's head under his chin. "We cannot have that. You are very annoying when you're pissy."

Shane rewarded his candor with a light punch to the arm. "Fuck off, Rozanov."

Ilya laughed, but under it he was worried— did Shane think this was a requirement of their relationship?

"You know, you do not have to keep studying this if you do not want to." He kissed Shane's nose, aiming for a specific freckle on the bridge. "I never expected you to become fluent in Russian when we started dating. You have already learned so much for me, and I don't mind speaking English. Russian is hard. If you are not enjoying it, please don't continue only for me."

Shane's lips tilted up slightly, and he nuzzled Ilya's neck. "I know. I just feel like it's the least I could do."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... being with me made things so hard for you, and you can't ever go home. I thought that if I learned Russian, I could—"

"Shane. *You* are home. Wherever I am, if you are on the other side of the bed, it is home."

Shane looked up at him helplessly. "But don't you miss Russia?"

"Sometimes. In a nostalgic way. Not in a way where I want to go back. The version of Russia that I miss does not exist anymore, and even if it did, I would choose you. Every time."

"I wish you didn't have to pick."

"I don't think I would've gone home, anyway," Ilya said, and he meant it. He couldn't think of any reason he would've had to go home since his father's death. Certainly not to see his brother or Polina. Ilya had no interest in visiting family that had never had any use for him besides money and verbal degradation.

"You don't?"

"I don't," Ilya repeated. "Everything I love is here. Sometimes I miss the places, sometimes I miss specific... moments. But I do not miss any of it the way I'd have missed you."

Shane didn't seem satisfied with that answer. His cheeks turned red, his gaze turned down to his lap. "Well, I still want to learn Russian. I want to talk to you in it someday."

"You already do."

"I want to have *real* conversations," Shane complained.

"It will come in time. You practice a lot."

"Sometimes I feel like I'll never get there."

"I don't care if you never do," Ilya admitted. He truly didn't. When he and Shane had become a couple and Shane said he wanted to 'learn Russian', Ilya had assumed that meant a few basic phrases, maybe some conversation starters. Shane had already surpassed all of his initial expectations.

"I know I don't have to, Ilya. But I love you, and I like feeling more connected to you, and to your culture. Especially given that we can't really visit Russia together. I wish I could see Moscow with you."

Ilya smiled tightly. "Is a beautiful city. I would take you tomorrow if I could."

"That's not the only reason, though." He seemed nervous. Ilya didn't understand why.

"What is the other reason?"

Shane let out a breath. "I don't know how to explain this. It's kind of silly."

Ilya played with the ends of Shane's hair. "Try to explain it anyway," he murmured, lips pressed to Shane's forehead.

Shane said nothing for a moment, took a breath, and started to speak with his face still hidden in Ilya's neck. "You're really, really good with English. But I know that sometimes you struggle to express some of your thoughts and stuff, especially when you're upset. It's not fair that when I need to get something out, we can talk in the language I was raised speaking, but when you're struggling, there's this whole extra layer of mental bullshit for you. I want to be able to speak Russian as well as you can speak English. But even if I never get to that level, I want to at least understand it. So that you can tell me what's going on in your head as easily as possible."

Ilya froze as he felt his eyes widen. Was it really that simple? Shane wanted communication to be easier for Ilya?

Shane had always treated him well, but it surprised Ilya how *good* it felt to know he was being considered like that. That Shane cared that much. Enough to learn an entire third language, just to understand Ilya the tiniest bit better. He actually had to look at the wall for a second to avoid crying.

Shane preened in the corner of his eye, and Ilya finally looked down again. He could tell that Shane was patting himself on the back for good husbanding, and it made Ilya want to smack

him. Or maybe kiss him until the oceans boiled over and the sun stopped shining. He wasn't sure which.

"That is one of the sweetest things you have ever said to me," Ilya said. "Thank you."

Shane nodded. "Mhm. I know. I'm killing this whole marriage thing."

Ilya cracked up and pushed Shane back into the couch. "Oh, this was a mistake. I should have said nothing, you are too proud of yourself. I am going away now." He made a move like he was getting up.

Shane shook his head, grabbed Ilya's wrist, and pulled Ilya down on top of him. It was rare that Shane did the manhandling. Ilya kind of liked it.

"Actually, I had an idea of somewhere else you could go."

Ilya rolled his eyes. Shane could do better than that. "Is that your idea of a come-on, Hollander? Very poor execution."

Shane hit him in the shoulder with the heel of his palm. "Shut up and fuck me."

Ilya laughed and stretched to the end table, fishing for a bottle of lube hidden in the drawer. He knew when to listen.

Ilya and Shane had a deal.

Well, sort of. It was an unspoken deal, but it was a deal nonetheless. Whenever Shane finished a chapter in one of his workbooks, he'd mention it offhandedly. Always seemingly the same day. And whenever Ilya heard that, he felt the need to make it worth Shane's while.

Ilya was making a smoothie in nothing but his palm tree pajama pants. When Shane came up behind him, pressed his face to the back of his shoulder, and slipped his fingertips into the front of the waistband, right where the cut of his hips disappeared, Ilya immediately knew what sort of morning they were going to have.

Still, he was going to play this cool. Just because they were married, that didn't mean he had to give it up so easily.

"Good morning, moy lyubimyy."

"Dobroye utro, krasavets," Shane murmured.

Oh.

Ilya attempted valiantly to keep his dick under control, but it was very difficult when Shane's hand was dipping lower and lower, pushing against his hip bone and grazing the skin around his cock. Ilya hadn't worn underwear to bed, and Shane was clearly using that to his advantage. Layer that with being called "handsome" in Russian, and Ilya was a mess. *Fuck.*

"What are you doing? I am trying to make you your smoothie because I love you," Ilya said. "You are distracting me."

"Mmmm." Shane didn't say anything in reply, just wrapped his hand around Ilya, and Ilya gripped the edge of the counter and inhaled sharply through his nose. He loved it when Shane took a little initiative. It was hot.

"I finished that unit I told you about the other day," Shane said.

Ilya could feel Shane's erection, hard and pressed up against the back of his thigh. He needed to get this under control. "Good boy," he said.

Shane didn't even flinch. Ilya was fucked. "I think I get a reward now, right? That's how it's always worked before."

Ilya smiled. So the deal wasn't just in his own head. "That could be arranged, yes." His voice was surprisingly level considering the way Shane was stroking him off. *God*, he was good at that. He had a lot of experience by now, nearly exclusively with Ilya. Ilya mourned for the world, that it didn't get to see Shane Hollander with his perfect pink lips wrapped around a cock or his eyes tilted back in pleasure when he came.

Ilya was far too selfish to share, though. That was all his.

Shane got Ilya out of his head with a slight increase in pressure that sent a jolt up his spine. "Okay," Shane said, then stilled his hand. He gave one more gentle squeeze, then pulled it out of Ilya's pants.

Ilya turned around and was greeted by an exceptionally self-satisfied grin on his husband's face. For a moment, he wasn't entirely sure what was going to happen, but he was trying to let Shane execute whatever plan he clearly had. Then Shane did something that turned his brain to useless mush in his skull.

"Vstan' na koleni," Shane ordered. Like it was the most casual thing in the world.

Without a word, Ilya pushed Shane up against the island and obediently got on his knees.

Shane was only in his boxer briefs, and it meant that Ilya could already clearly see the hard outline of him. Usually, Ilya would've taken the opportunity to be irritating. *Okay, now what? You want me to touch you? Where?*

Today would be different. Shane was taking what he wanted *and* he'd finished his workbook chapter. Two things Ilya liked. He wanted to reward good behavior.

Ilya leaned forward and mouthed at Shane's cock through the fabric, earning a hiss and a hand in his hair. "*Fuck*, Ilya."

Ilya already knew that he was going to take his time. Sure, it was Shane's prize, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to do it his own way. He ran his tongue over the head of Shane's cock, and Shane moaned softly. Ilya could spend a whole day with his head between Shane's legs, he was pretty sure. He nuzzled him a little further, mouth working against the shaft, and he could literally feel Shane twitch against his cheek.

Shane whined. "Ilya, please," he begged, voice cracking on the second word. Ilya's resolve broke. Still, he wanted to hear it.

"Please what?"

"Please, Ilya. I need your mouth on me. You're so fucking good at this, I need to feel it." Shane's lips were parted, eyes cast skyward, hand trembling against Ilya's scalp while the other was back against the cabinet.

Ilya leaned back on his heels, causing Shane's hand to fall away. Maybe he could be a little annoying after all. "You were very confident before. Now you are begging. Is very sad."

Shane looked down at him, eyes pleading and lower lip caught in his teeth. "It's what you do to me, Ilya. You always have."

Maybe it was the innocence of his face, his sweet, clean-cut good looks. Maybe it was his perfect reputation. Ilya wasn't entirely sure why Shane talking like that always sent his heartbeat flying in a way no other dirty talk could—but he knew he couldn't stand to deny Shane for even another second.

Fine. You win.

Ilya reached up and hooked his fingers into the waistband of Shane's underwear. He let his fingertips trail along Shane's thighs as they dragged downwards, nails scraping against the hard muscle and soft skin, and then Shane's cock was erect and leaking and right in front of him.

Unsurprisingly, there was a bead of precum that had gathered at the slit. Ilya wrapped one hand around Shane and used his thumb to spread it over the head. He always loved how wet Shane got, from the very first time they hooked up. He placed a few kisses along the tops of Shane's thighs, just holding his dick in his hand.

"So beautiful for me. So perfect. Stunning." Ilya punctuated each phrase by pressing his lips against Shane's flawless skin. He meant it. There was no piece of art or architecture that compared to Shane Hollander splayed out before him.

Shane whined again, legs trembling, and Ilya finally rewarded him for his patience by sliding the head of his cock into his mouth, letting it rub against the inside of his cheek. Shane moaned his name above him, which felt better than any award. As the familiar weight settled against his tongue, Ilya shut his eyes and hummed. He was going to savor this.

Ilya hadn't gone to church in years. Not regularly, anyway. He went to the local orthodox parish once a year, on his mother's birthday. He'd light a candle, say a prayer, donate one

hundred dollars, and leave. He'd never really understood it. He believed in God, in some form, but religion was another thing entirely. The spectacle of it all, the bowed heads, the silence. He'd never felt the presence of Christ in a cathedral or a church or his own home, but he went anyway.

This, though. On his knees in his kitchen, while his sweet husband panted and gasped above him purely from the workings of his mouth.

Ilya thought that maybe he was starting to understand what it meant to actually worship.

When Ilya bottomed out, his nose pressed against Shane's abdomen, golden crucifix hanging between Shane's thighs, he stayed perfectly still. He'd always loved this, the feeling of being filled. Knowing the babbling mess he could turn Shane into with nothing but his lips, tongue, and teeth. He opened his eyes, looking up at Shane through his lashes, and wanted to gasp from the sight.

Shane was looking right back down at him, brown eyes dark and eyelids heavy, his mouth hanging open and the longer bits of his bangs falling in his eyes. His entire face was flushed, the pink spreading to the tips of his ears and the top of his chest. One of his hands was gripping the counter, and the other sunk back into Ilya's hair. He felt a slight tug as Shane grabbed a handful, but it wasn't in a demanding way. More appreciative.

Ilya forgot that he was actually giving a blowjob. He just stayed there for a long moment, Shane eventually reaching down with his free hand to trace his thumb over Ilya's cheek. Ilya felt no rush to get to work- from the look on Shane's face, he didn't mind the view. Ilya's jaw was beginning to ache, and his eyes were watering slightly, but he didn't care in the slightest. He wanted to stay right here until the house burned down around them or the roof caved in.

No. He'd promised Shane a reward.

Ilya pulled off, got a good breath, went down again, and picked up the pace. Not too much, but enough to know that he was building Shane towards his climax. He took Shane's dick out of his mouth and drew slow circles on the underside of the head with his tongue until Shane was pleading. He took him to the base and swallowed around him until Shane was moaning desperately and pulling at his hair, his own hands digging into Shane's thighs. He'd been fucking him for more than ten years, now. He knew what Shane liked, how to treat his body, what to do to draw his pleasure. When Shane got close to the edge, Ilya doubled down and sucked him harder, and Shane came down his throat. Just the way Ilya had known he would.

Ilya kept Shane in his mouth till he was most of the way soft, sucking gently as he came off with a satisfying pop. He smiled. He liked that sound. The sharp feeling of pulled hair went away as Shane loosened his fingers, and then he started massaging Ilya's scalp with both hands in apology. Ilya nearly moaned, it felt so good. He tipped his head into the touch, closed his eyes, and hummed appreciatively.

After a short while, Shane removed his hands from Ilya's hair. Ilya stood, pulling Shane's underwear up with him. Once Ilya was settled on his feet and rubbing his jaw with his hand, Shane smiled sheepishly up at him. "Fuck, Ilya, I think you killed me. I don't know how I'm standing right now," he said.

Ilya grinned. There were few versions of Shane he loved more than happy, sated Shane. He leaned down and kissed him. Even though Ilya was half hard and they were both half naked, the kiss was light and sweet. Shane dragged a few fingers along Ilya's stubble. Ilya knew how much Shane loved the scratchy texture against his skin.

Ilya eventually pulled away, more out of a desire for breath than one to stop kissing. "Go sit on the couch. I will bring you the smoothie and we can watch a show. Maybe we take Anya to the park in like an hour."

Shane looked at him skeptically. "You don't want anything?"

Ilya grinned. "We have all day, Hollander. I'm not done with you yet."

Shane reached up, held Ilya's jaw in his hand, and kissed his cheek. "Good. Try to keep up," he said. Then he sauntered off to the living room with a confidence Ilya hadn't seen once prior to them becoming a couple.

Someday, Ilya was sure that Shane was going to stop surprising him. Someday.

Ilya was sitting on the couch, half-finished with a mission in Modern Warfare Two, when Shane plopped himself into his lap.

"Oh, hello. No, is fine. I was not doing anything anyway," Ilya said, eyes still on the screen. He shot an enemy soldier and threw a grenade.

Shane pressed a kiss to his jaw, arms wrapping around Ilya's shoulders. "Quit whining and pause it, I can tell you're playing on story mode."

Ilya paused his game, but he certainly didn't quit whining. "How can you tell? I think you just know I am working on the story right now and took your chances."

Shane pushed Ilya's curls back from his face with gentle hands. "If that's what you say, Ilyusha."

The warmth that spread through Ilya's body at being called *Ilyusha* could've ended arguments much bigger than this one. Ilya cocked an eyebrow. "I see that you have been practicing the diminutives."

"Mhm. Even texted Svetlana first to make sure I got it right."

Ilya could feel himself blushing, which was rare, and Shane's face made it clear that he was savoring it.

"Svetlana is helping you be romantic with me?"

“Of course, moya lyubov.”

Ilya shook his head. “That’s mine, you can’t have that one,” he said.

“It’s ‘my love’! You can’t call dibs on ‘my love’, Ilya, it’s like the most basic term of endearment in the world.”

Ilya snaked his hands around Shane’s waist, the controller hitting the carpet. “Oh? Do you need me to pick more complicated ones? Are you no longer impressed?” He kissed Shane’s cheeks between sentences, making Shane laugh and squirm.

Shane managed to escape Ilya’s grip, twisting his body so Ilya wasn’t holding him so tight, and he held Ilya’s face between his hands. “Tell you the truth? I’m always impressed. You could call me anything and I’d probably fucking melt. Russian is sexy.”

“I will call you ‘ashtray’ next time.”

Shane’s nose wrinkled. “That’s disgusting, Ilya. Can you be not gross?”

Ilya grinned at him. “Why would I ever stop when you love it so much? Now let me play my game.”

Shane playfully rolled his eyes as he got out of Ilya's lap. “Okay, Ilyushenka.”

Ilya shook his head with a laugh, leaning down for the controller. “No, Shane. That one is too cutesy. That is something your mother calls you when you are five.”

Shane laid down on the couch, put his head in Ilya’s lap, and watched him fire the game back up. “Hmm. Then I guess I’ll have to tell my mom.”

Ilya opened his mouth to argue, but then he shut it again. The thought of Yuna Hollander calling him *Ilyushenka*... it felt strangely right. Something he wanted. Yuna could never replace his own mother, of course, but she was certainly a lovely addition. She and David had been treating him as their own since long before he and Shane got married. Sometimes, he felt his mother watching over them when he spent time with Yuna. He liked to imagine she’d like Yuna, too. Someone had to love her son while she couldn’t.

Ilya loved Yuna. She loved him back, even outside of the fact that he was her son’s husband. Ilya was lucky. Lucky and grateful.

“Yes, you should. I would like that,” Ilya said, voice trembling slightly. Shane tilted his head back on Ilya’s thigh and stroked his forearm. The touch was reassuring.

Shane smiled gently up at him and whispered. “They love you, y’know.”

“I love them too.”

There was more weight hanging in the words, but Ilya didn’t explain any further. He knew Shane already understood.

Ilya went back to his game for a while, and Shane turned his head to watch. Later, when Ilya had the equipment menu up, he saw Shane look up at him again in his peripheral vision. Ilya looked down, and their eyes met.

Shane was studying him carefully. "Did you like that? When I called you Ilyusha?"

Ilya smiled, ran his fingers through Shane's glossy hair, and nodded. "A lot. Don't overuse it, though. It's very sappy."

Shane smiled back. "I won't."

"It is like when I call you 'sweetheart', except with the mushiness multiplied by a thousand."

That made Shane laugh. "Noted."

It was a natural point to turn back to the game, and yet Ilya didn't want to. He wanted to count every freckle on Shane's face, individually. He wanted to hold Shane against his chest for a decade straight.

Another moment went by, the two men just looking at each other. No words were exchanged, but Ilya could've sworn he and Shane were thinking the exact same thing.

The next morning, Ilya slept in a little later than usual. Shane woke up before him on a normal day, so the fact the bed was empty when he opened his eyes didn't stand out at all. He got up and grabbed last night's t-shirt off the floor, pulling it over his head. When Anya saw he was up, she hopped out of her bed and started jumping at his feet, wiggling her whole body in excitement.

"Yes, Anya, papochka's awake!"

This was why Ilya loved dogs. Nothing else had ever been so happy to see him in his life. He leaned down, gave her the scratches along her back that she loved, and smiled bigger when she licked his cheek. If Shane had seen that, he'd probably make Ilya go wash his face.

Ilya did still need to go into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He wanted kissing privileges.

Once Anya had received an acceptable amount of head pats and Ilya had brushed his teeth, the pair of them wandered into the kitchen. He and Anya had a simple morning ritual: while Ilya waited for his coffee to brew, he'd give her a slice of cheese from the fridge. Shane wasn't allowed to know, because he would definitely complain that it was undermining her training. She had an issue with whining for scraps while they cooked, so Shane was strict about not feeding her in the kitchen. Ilya was trying to be the fun dad.

The soft pitter-patters of her paws on the hardwood echoed as they walked through the house. When Ilya saw Shane writing at the breakfast table, still sweaty after his morning run, in his

glasses and with half his hair pulled back, Ilya didn't think twice about it. He must've been working on his Russian.

Ilya walked over to the table, leaned down, and kissed the top of Shane's head. "Good morning, moy krolik," he murmured into his husband's hair.

He was about to stand up and wait for Shane to take a guess what "krolik" meant, but what he saw on the page made him freeze.

Shane wasn't writing in one of his workbooks. He was writing in a lined spiral notebook. The same word, over and over and over again. Four times per line, evenly spaced to form columns.

Илья.

Shane very rarely practiced his handwriting in Russian. He had done enough to learn the alphabet, but always said he wanted to focus his limited time on speaking and listening so he could talk to Ilya. This was excessive for him. Ilya squinted at the page, like if he looked at it for long enough, Shane's motivations would be magically revealed.

"Shane, what are you doing?"

Shane's cheeks were rosy under his freckles. "I'm practicing writing your name."

Ilya smiled against his hair. He was too cute. "Yes. I can see this. You wrote it like a million times. Follow up question: why?"

Shane squirmed, and Ilya wrapped his arms around his upper body. *Always so nervous, my sweetheart.* "I was just thinking about how it might be kind of weird for you, I guess? Because you grew up your whole life with your name written down looking one way, and now you look at it and it's completely different and it probably feels wrong. It would feel weird to me, I don't know."

Shane stopped talking, but Ilya didn't fill the silence. Shane had more to say, he could tell. Also, Ilya's heart was about to start beating hard enough to crack his ribs, so he was in no state to converse.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Shane went on. "I just thought it might be nice if I could write it the right way when I leave you notes around the house and stuff. I don't have to if you don't like it, but I thought that might be nice for you. So I started practicing. And I got it right the first time, but I wanted to make sure I *really* had it, that it was total muscle memory, because—"

Ilya couldn't take it anymore. He kissed him.

Ilya Rozanov had a husband who could read his mind, apparently, and did the sweetest things to make him feel a tenth of a percent more comfortable in his adoptive country. Ilya didn't care about English or Russian or anything else anymore. The only person he needed to

communicate with was Shane, and he could do it just as well with his hands and lips and tongue. Voices and words were optional.

When they separated, Shane looked so adorably confused that Ilya had to resist the urge to just kiss him again. "I love you so, so much, Shane. Thank you."

Shane smiled, and Ilya could practically see the heat dissipate from the back of his neck. Had Shane been embarrassed at how totally he loved Ilya?

Ilya hoped not. He wanted a lifetime of this.

"Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu," Shane whispered.

Never mind. Ilya was going to have to kiss him again after all. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Shane's, careful not to bump his nose against his glasses. He let dark hair get caught between his fingers and deepened the kiss.

Before Ilya fell in love with Shane, he thought the big things would be the most important parts of a relationship. Weddings, kids, so on and so forth. That was what everyone always talked about, right?

Ilya had actual experience now, and he knew that wasn't remotely true. His wedding day was the best day of his life, and thinking about Shane's proposal to him made him want to cry, but those weren't the moments that actually made up their relationship. Those were celebrations of it. Their relationship was built on right now, a million times over, and also never again. Every second spent with Shane added together into the softest love Ilya had ever known, something he didn't realize he needed until he had it. It was by far the greatest gift he'd ever been given, the one thing that made everything else in his life worthwhile.

Ilya wished he could live in the little moments forever. Stanley Cups were great, coffee over the breakfast table was better.

The time was always passing. The seconds were plentiful, but ultimately finite. So as Ilya pulled back half an inch and stared into Shane's warm, kiss-dazed eyes, and admired his little smile and his delightful freckles, he reminded himself to savor it. To hold on tight to this sexy, gentle, adorable superstar and never let go.

Ilya Rozanov had exactly one home, and it was this: hours spent in Russian workbooks and quiet mornings in the kitchen. Freezing cold feet in his lap and poached eggs piled on toast. Praise whispered into his skin and kisses exchanged before bed.

Ilya Rozanov had exactly one home, and it was Shane.

End Notes

did not even TOUCH the ending. loved it when i wrote it the first time, love it now.

The lovely [Tequila1989](#) gave me edits on the Russian when I posted the original fic, so I'm going to thank them again for that here.

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